

THE HICKORY STICK

BY

NINA MOORE JAMIESON

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THE HICKORY STICK

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A Romance of the School in the Cedars

BY

NINA MOORE JAMIESON

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CHAPTER I

A LETTER OF ACCEPTANCE

L AURA tossed the letter upon her bed, and rose to her feet exultantly. Her grey eyes glowed with triumph, and the color in her cheeks rivalled that of the holly berries in the wreath at her window. She stepped lightly across the pretty bedroom until she came face to face with her own charming reflection in the tall, old-fashioned mirror that hung beside her modest dressing-table.

Bowing ceremoniously, she kissed the tips of her fingers in salute to the responsive image in the glass.

“Accepted!” There was a happy thrill in her voice—“Accepted, young lady! It seems too wonderful—”

She stood for a moment looking at herself. Unconsciously the smile faded from her face, which drew into lines of dignity and authority, and there was a crispness in her voice when she spoke again—

“Third-class, take your spellers: turn to page 88. Study section 172 for your lesson.”

“My dear Laura,” broke in an amused voice, and Laura turned to see a sweet-faced woman standing at the open door, smiling in pleasant understanding.

“Mother—it sounds all right, doesn’t it? Not too severe—not too lenient—”

"Just right," assured her mother. Laura laid an arm lovingly around her and drew her into the room.

"Sit down," she said eagerly. "Sit down and hear the great news. Such a quaint letter—read it—you'll see."

She thrust the untidy pages into her mother's hands, and dropped down beside the low rocking-chair where her mother had seated herself. She laid her bright face against the smooth silk dress and sighed contentedly, while Mrs. West's swift eyes scanned the letter.

"Oh dear! I'm so glad they've accepted me. Somehow I just wanted that particular school—queer thing, isn't it, that one should appeal so much more than another."

"It is strange," admitted her mother, dropping one smeary sheet of the letter distastefully upon the floor. "I had thought you would prefer to teach in town—it would be much pleasanter than far-off, backwoods place like this Andrews' Bay. Mr. Scott spoke very favorably about you last night, and seemed to think you would have not the slightest difficulty in getting on the staff here."

"But Mother! I went to school to most of those teachers, and they are years and years older than I am. They would just fairly sit on me, and smother me!"

"There are other schools not far away."

"That's just it," the girl broke in earnestly. "I like this one because it is far away. I can make my mistakes and get my experience in my

own fashion. When I'm old the beaten path may attract me, but now—”

“ ‘Beyond the east the sunrise, beyond
the west the sea—
East and west the wanderlust that will
not let me be.’ ”

murmured her mother softly, and Laura, following her thought added, “Oh yes, and you know—‘The old ships draw to home again, the young ships sail away.’ It is natural to want something a little out of the commonplace, isn’t it, Mother? Perhaps you felt like that yourself, years ago?”

“Perhaps I did,” said her mother softly, patting the dark head. Then a little silence fell, while the pages of the letter rustled as they moved in the slender hands, and Mrs. West’s eyes bent, unseeing, upon the scrubby writing. She fought down her keen disappointment, while Laura, seated on the floor beside her, regarded her own slender ankles appreciatively with no thought of the struggle behind that still face.

“I must have heavy shoes,” said the girl thoughtfully, after a few moments. “Heavy ones. Perhaps I had better have felt-lined ones. It will be cold and snowy there.”

“You have definitely decided, then?”

“Oh yes! Unless—”

“Unless what, dear?”

“Unless you want me to stay here. You first. Just say the word, mother.”

Mrs. West laughed, not very steadily, not very

mirthfully, but in full appreciation of that candid offer.

"Dear child," she said tenderly, "you are launching out to earn your own living now, and it is not for your mother to stand in your way. To judge by the letter, Andrews' Bay needs a teacher, and you, I am sure, will be a great help to every one there. I won't deny I'd rather it were nearer home, but then—it is not out of the world, after all."

"Do you know, mother," Laura said seriously, "I have always felt so interested when I saw on the maps at school a great block of territory marked 'Unexplored.' It might be anything. It seemed Romance and Mystery dwelt there, and called to every drop of young blood in me. I feel that way about Andrews' Bay."

"Well," returned her mother, "I dare say the people who live there the year round find it tedious and wearisome enough. And this does not sound very romantic—" She read from the page in her hand—"Last year we dident have much school our teacher got sore on us and quit so our school aint what it might be can you play the origin there is one into the school and mostly the teacher plays it for us when we have speaking on sundays a young methadust student from tronto speaks on sunday afternoons for a boardan place Mrs. McCoy has kept the teachers this while back she will board you at one 75 a week without washing'."

"All in one breath, isn't it?" commented Laura, laughing. "I'm going to save that letter to show to my grandchildren as a curiosity, in

years to come."

"But what does it mean about 'one 75 a week without washing'?" her mother asked with a little frown. "You had better take soap and towels of your own."

"Oh Mother!" Laura's laugh was good to hear. "The dear man means laundry—Mrs. McCoy won't attend to the laundering of my clothes. Small blame to her. It's not very nice to think of washing the garments of some one who is quite a stranger."

"But who will wash them? You have never done anything like that," Mrs. West protested.

Laura lifted her chin a trifle, and spread out strong, shapely hands. "Washing my own clothes isn't going to hurt me," she stated impressively. "It is my business to teach others to do what they have never done before. Shall I not practise what I preach?"

"I think you'll soon be doing many things—for the first time," said her mother shrewdly. "And I can't help wondering how you will like it. I do not know very much about the ways of country people, but I believe they eat their meals in the kitchen, hired help and all, at the same table."

"Oh yes! And they eat with their knives, and have pie and doughnuts for breakfast. And they never use their front doors, or read anything but the newspaper. I shall feel like a missionary to the heathen."

Ah my dear, don't start out with that feeling. It will hinder your success, and will hurt you, as it will hurt the people who find that hint

of mockery or condescension in your words or manner. But I am sure," Mrs. West went on, mildly withdrawing from her tone every slightest hint of rebuke, "my girl will be truly considerate of the sensitiveness of others. You have had advantages which have been denied to many of the people among whom you will work. Share, if you can, as one shares with a friend. There is no doubt you will find many splendid characters—country life develops strength."

"Oh yes," said Laura vaguely. She expected to enjoy every turn of the new life. The scattered pages of her letter of acceptance lay at hand, and she arranged them in order, then raised herself easily from the floor. "No more sitting humbly on the floor for me," she declared drawing herself up with impressiveness. "I must put away childish things, and be a shining glory to the great teaching profession."

"Don't grow old too suddenly," her mother begged, with a smile. "Your youth will go of its own accord—don't hurry it."

"No, but I must remember my dignity. And now, as my obedient servant Joshua Abercrombie, requests the 'faver of an erlyancer' perhaps I had better see about it. I imagine Joshua as a big man, with great whiskers and a mighty voice. So of course he isn't. People never are what we expect them to be. As for the Methadust Student, he is certain to be one of the 'unco guid and overly righteous'—like the lady Kipling tells about, who was good beyond all earthly need."

"My dear!" protested her mother gently.

"Do you suppose," Laura went on, standing in front of the mirror again and smoothing her dark hair, "Mother, do you suppose for a minute that he'll give me tracts to read, and ask me about my soul? I wouldn't like that. I hope—I earnestly hope he's human—not too good—"

"Too good? Why this dislike to righteousness?" her mother asked in mild wonder.

"Oh," Laura laughed, "Righteousness is greatly to be desired, but a little wickedness is much more interesting, isn't it? Here goes any way, for the fateful missive. How had I better begin? 'My dear Sir—or 'My dear Mr. Abercrombie,' or, informally, 'Dear Joshua'?"

But Mrs. West, pausing a moment beside her tall daughter, only smiled and murmured lovingly, "Laura! Laura!"

CHAPTER II

A WILD NIGHT ON THE PENINSULA

THERE was a wild storm in the Northland. The lake, far out, lashed and hammered furiously upon the Barrier Islands, behind which, ice stretched to the shore. The bay was shackled, but it took more than December frosts to bind the roaring, heaving monster that raged beyond. The angry wind smote the shore, beating tremendously upon the few brave trees that fringed it. The snow whirled under that driving force, tossing itself upon every available ledge—only to be swept away instantly by the great broom of the wind.

From the windows of the McCoy home, lamp-light gleamed redly, emphasizing by its cheerful contrast, the comfort within and the storm without. The house was comparatively sheltered, for an orchard lay to the north, and the barn buildings stood squarely to the west. A light glimmered at the stable also, and one who was curious might have found by investigation that it proceeded from a lantern in the hands of a woman.

Having finished milking, she fed the two cows and their calves. She filled old Job's manger with hay and shook up his bedding. The colt

was likewise cared for, and then she took her pail of milk, slung the lantern over her arm, and went out into the storm. It was not far to the house, but part of the milk was spilled, and she was quite breathless before she had gained the kitchen and closed the door behind her. The heat of the roaring fire, the light, and the stillness made it seem as though she had stepped into another world. She set down the pail and the lantern and drew off the close-fitting cap from her head, showing hair, brown, abundant and beautiful, about a face of distinct character.

The blue eyes were deep-set, keen, yet kindly; the cheek-bones were high, and the whole face of a somewhat ascetic leanness, but the shrewd twinkle, and the lines of laughter about the large honest mouth, bespoke the sense of humor that sometimes saves the reason, sometimes indeed saves the soul, and always unfailingly, saves the situation. The face was Scotch, and the tongue matched it, for when she spoke, her voice and her words were of that ancient, honorable kingdom.

"Sirs. It's a wild nicht," she said to the empty kitchen.

She stripped off her outdoor garments, and showed herself as a tall, wiry woman neatly dressed, and remarkable chiefly for the shortness of her skirts and the fact that she wore the regulation socks and rubbers of the lumberman. In the early years of the twentieth century, women had not yet emancipated themselves from the long trailing skirt, therefore Anne McCoy took from behind the door a garment of the

ordinary length and volume which she slipped over the abbreviated one, and so transformed herself from chore boy to housewife. The socks and rubbers remained. She might have to go out again into the storm at any time.

She washed her hands, strained the milk and set it away, then washed the milk pail and swept the already immaculate floor. The clock indicated half past seven. She glanced about the room. It was wide, low-ceilinged, comfortable. A great stove with wood-box behind it; an ancient wash stand with basin, soap and water pail; a sewing machine and scrap basket; a large dresser surmounted by the clock and an array of shining lamps; a long, wide, inviting couch with many cushions; a solid kitchen table; half a dozen chairs of various shapes and patterns—these her eyes scanned critically. They were worn, but still in good heart. Everything showed care. The calendars on the walls were the only decorations there. The floor was unpainted, and of an oak that any millionaire might envy. The uneven walls told of the mighty logs that lay behind them. Little windows recalled days when glass was dear, and much light undesirable because it faded the carpets. It was a typical kitchen of the Bruce Peninsula, except that perhaps it was larger than most of them—and it was still typical in that there opened from it bedrooms so small and dark that they seemed little better than clothes-closets.

To the door of one of these she moved presently, and stood listening for a few moments. From the darkness came a quiet voice, con-

trolled, but weary—a pleasant voice which instantly gained for the speaker the attention and favor of the listener.

“Come in, mother, if you are not busy.”

She thrust the door open and entered. It was not a large room, yet it was not crowded. A glowing lamp stood on a table beside the bed, and the wide window-sill accommodated a number of books. The light shone upon a face which showed power in every line and feature. Serious dark eyes under straight brows were keen and thoughtful, and their promise was fulfilled in fine mobile lips and square chin. Yet it was chained power. Kerry McCoy had for two years been almost a cripple.

Sometimes he chafed and strained at his shackles; at times he fought through the long night with the terrible depression attendant upon his weakness. Yet he was not without hope for the future, even in his darkest hours. His mother's swift eyes searched his face, but found no trace of the struggle she dreaded for him; he was calmly unconscious of himself. Laying aside his book, he stretched out his hand and drew the chair closer to his bed, inviting his mother to be seated.

“Are ye wantin' ony thing, Lad?”

“Nothing, now that you are here. It's storming yet—I can hear it. Do you suppose she'll come to-night?”

“It's awfu' wild, but she may come. They toon lasses ken naethin' aboot country roads an' weather. I houp ye'll hae some pleasure wi' this yin. Yon Brewster woman wis as dry as a bottle

efter a loggin' bee—nae life nor energy aboot her, only the label to tell o' past glories."

"You didn't like her, mother, did you?" he said smiling affectionately. "But she really was a good hearted soul—see how she used to help me with mathematics and history. Perhaps this teacher may not care to do so."

"It'll be you tae help her, I'm thinkin.' She's only a bit o' a lass eighteen or nineteen year old forbye—" which was the very thing Kerry desired to know. "This is her first school—maybes her last. There's no mony can thole the winter an' the loneliness."

"Well, mother," he said thoughtfully, "take the lamp with you when you hear the sleigh bells—Crombie has gone after her, I suppose. I'm through studying for to-night, so take the lamp and leave my door open. I'm quite curious for a look at this daring young lady who would venture to such a remote place when there must have been so many chances for her nearer home. I shall be quite disappointed if she does not come."

She was coming. The train, snow held in all its northward journey, was late when it reached the little town of Squireton. Darkness was falling, with the premature twilight of the storm as she stepped from the close, over-heated car to the wind-swept station platform, and glanced about uncertainly. A flickering light gleamed palely upon flying snowflakes, and filled the corners with wavering shadows. As the crowd of passengers melted away, she turned towards the waiting room, where at least there was shelter

and a possibility of information as to her destination.

Two men standing near the swaying lamp, watched her with interest.

'It's her, parson. Ask her if it ain't,' urged the smaller of the two, impatiently.

"Hush, Crombie. She will hear you," said the other in a voice of authority. Then stepping forward and raising his heavy cap, he spoke to Laura with some slight embarrassment. Saluting strange young ladies at a railway station was not at all in his line.

"My name is John Hayes," he explained, while her startled eyes measured him in the half-light. "This is Mr. Abercrombie. We have come to meet Miss Laura West, the teacher for Andrews' Bay—"

"You're her, ain't you?" interposed Crombie, whose feet were cold with waiting. "All right. Come on, an' let's get away."

Laura, thus accosted, transferred her gaze to the countenance of Mr. Joshua Abercrombie, or as much of it as might be seen behind a barrier of fur cap, frosty eyebrows, and a most luxuriant growth of whiskers. This was the author, then, of the cherished letter which had lured her by its promise of Adventure and Romance. There was little of either in his appearance. She offered her hand in greeting, acknowledging her identity and thanking them for meeting her.

"If you'll let me have your baggage checks, I'll see about that part of it," suggested John Hayes.

"Thank you, indeed," she said gratefully, for she was not accustomed to travelling alone, and the gathering darkness, the storm and the strangeness of it all were rather terrifying to her.

"Now, Crombie, take the young lady over to McCausland's, and get her a cup of tea before we start out. I'll bring the horses around in a quarter of an hour," commanded this man of righteousness. Laura was certain that he transferred a coin to the hand of the embarrassed Crombie, who thereupon led the way down a snow-clad street where brief, sudden hills rose upon the west, and a broken view of stores, houses, masts of winter-bound vessels, and silent bay, spread out upon the east. Mr. Abercrombie felt the weight of his responsibilities and coughed considerably. Why could not this unperceiving young woman state without reserve that she did not want any tea? Tea! The idea of squandering a good thirst upon such an insignificant beverage. A New Year's, too, of all seasons. He clutched closely the money that the young minister had given him, while inspiration emanated from the touch. Why not leave her to pay for her own cup of tea? He could slip back to the Arlington to see about his bottle and be with her again at the restaurant before the meddling parson-fellow got back with the horses. Great idea! He felt cheerful enough for a little conversation.

"Terrible cold weather—for the time o' the year, that is, Teacher," he said, following the accepted plan of calling people by a title rather than a name. His voice was small, like him-

self, and of a certain acid quality. Laura had an impression of cap and whiskers and all-enveloping ulster, with very little human avoirdupois beneath.

"It is cold, Mr. Abercrombie, and I am very grateful to you for coming after me. I had expected to hire a livery to take me to Andrews' Bay."

"Well, well," interposed Crombie hastily. "I'm sure I'll not charge you what the livery would. Two dollars, they ask, but seeing it's you, I'll take a dollar—"

She seemed unimpressed, and he risked another plunge.

"And fifty—"

Still she stood it well, and he coughed largely, to drown his mistake.

"And seventy-five cents."

He held his breath in apprehension, measuring her out of the corner of his eye. One false step now would place her at a disadvantage for the future. Laura, however, had her wits about her, and answered him serenely, but with a crushing finality.

"A dollar, I think, Mr. Abercrombie," she said, dashing his hopes with a pitiless hand. Nor would she allow him to leave her at the restaurant. She had seen his yearning face in the light of the Arlington House as they passed it, and knew that instead of giving her into Crombie's care, John Hayes had delivered that gentleman into her hands. Therefore she declined to let him go and the bottle he longed for lay undisturbed in its case at the hotel.

In a few moments the big sleigh drew up at the door of the little restaurant, and her trunk and suitcase reposed modestly among various bags of sugar, and flour; a barrel of salt bolstered them, and a keg of nails provided the necessary ballast. She wondered who was responsible for it all, not understanding that a man who took the trip to town invariably bore commissions for all his neighbors. John Hayes, revealed in the light of the little store, showed himself to be a businesslike young soldier of the truth, with an earnest, aggressive countenance. He extended to her a large coat of dogskin and invited her to wrap herself up in it.

"Why?" she asked in surprise, giving him a direct look from her wide eyes, fringed by dark lashes and bright with excitement. She had not the least intention of covering her smart new cloth coat with that dingy garment.

"Come, come," he said, pleasantly insistent, but trampling her feminine whims with true Wesleyan disregard for the adorning of the body. "Slide it on over yours. You have to cross the Peninsula to-night in the face of a howling storm—it would go through that little coat of yours like water through a straw hat. Come, young lady, get it on."

She drew back with dignity, offended by his familiarity; but Crombie, who had his own reasons for being annoyed with her, seized the coat and flung it about her, fastening it with awkward fingers while he muttered impatiently:

"You'll be glad of it afore we get to the Bay—this is no summer evening. Jump into the sleigh

now, an' let's get away. The night will be a wild one."

She worked her arms into the sleeves of the great clumsy coat and struggled into the low old-fashioned sleigh. The only seat was a loose board which however was solid enough when she was wedged upon it between the two men. The rangy, mangy team started forward at a word from John Hayes, while Crombie was occupied with muffling her in an ancient buffalo robe—"for all the world as if we were headed for Alaska," she thought to herself.

They turned up one of the sudden steep hills, and then north into the night away from the lights and houses. Menacing balsams crowded close to hold them back, but ever a thread of road led on into the darkness. The wind howled bitterly; scattered gusts tossed snow into their faces. The road bumped, turned, wound around stumps or angled sharply to avoid snow crowned rocks. Such a night—such a wind!

There was straw in the sleigh-box and she had plenty of robes about her. Huddled in the dog-skin coat, she almost dozed at times, but was called back by an occasional inquiry from John Hayes. Was she cold? or tired? or hungry? She was not, although she yawned and shivered as she said it, and tried hard to keep from picturing the smoking hot supper which she hoped to find at the end of this weary journey. The darkness deepened; no moon came forth to illumine the Siberian dreariness. Once in a while they saw the lights of a dwelling, but they saw not a soul upon their journey. Laura's eyes

drooped with fatigue, her face was stiff with cold, and she had serious doubts about the end of her nose. Presently they crossed a little frozen lake and drew up the hill beyond it. But there they met with such a shrieking pandemonium of wind, snow, and howling storm voices, that she knew beyond doubt why the young student had brought the coat for her. She bent her face before the blast which never ceased for an instant, but seemed to gather fury with every step of their journey.

"Turn your face against me!" shouted the young man. Her hat, small as it was, tore at her hair, which whipped her cheeks with loosened strands, and threatened to tumble down altogether. She had a vision of herself—almost ridiculous enough to bring a sob of laughter into her throat. Meanwhile the storm grew wilder, as though its former efforts had been mere pretence, and she seemed to hear some mighty undertone in its voice—the Lake, if she had but known it.

Quite two hours from the time of leaving the little snow-girt town had elapsed before she noticed that the horses were walking quietly, instead of fighting the elements as they had been doing. A curtain seemed to have dropped, shutting the storm away, for they had come within the shelter of a windbreak of low growing trees. The weary team plodded on towards the dark bulk of a house, from whose windows lamp-light shone redly. Then as they halted amid a final clang of bells, a door was flung open, and a woman with a lantern in her hand stood upon the threshold.

"Come awa' in—the nicht's awfu' wild," she said in a deep, delightful voice.

"No mistake about it, indeed, Mrs. McCoy," laughed the young man as he flung the lines to Crombie and helped out his numb and speechless passenger. "Here's your young lady. Crombie and I will be in presently."

He set the suitcase in at the door, and taking the lantern, showed light while he and Crombie manipulated the trunk. But Laura was in the kitchen, as bewildered as a young bird which has been tossed from the nest. Trembling with the reaction after the long journey during which every nerve and muscle had been tense with excitement and cold, she yielded like a little child to Mrs. McCoy's brisk, capable hands. Truly Kerry had something to think of, that night.

CHAPTER III

KERRY MCCOY

THE next morning was Sunday. Laura awoke betimes, although she was unutterably weary after the all-day journey and the stormy drive across the Peninsula which had succeeded it. Her bed was a feather bed, and wonderfully comfortable to lie upon, while a modest embankment formed of seven pieced quilts and a white crocheted bed spread effectually prevented the escape of any heat which might be imprisoned beneath them.

"No danger of freezing to death here," she reflected, and withdrew under the quilts until only the tip of her nose protruded, while with lazy eyes she watched her breath turn to a white plume in the chilly air. It was a little room, with painted walls of green. The ceiling was blue, and the floor yellow where it showed between the braided rag rugs. A dresser, wash-stand and chair were the only furniture except the big bed, and they were all within arm's reach of her as she lay and looked at them. The window with its broad sill and frosty panes was so close that she could feel its ghostly breath. Such a contrast to her own room at home, which

was spacious and dainty, and fitted lovingly for her use by hands that forestalled every wish.

She gave a little natural sigh, and then resolutely put aside all inclination to homesickness. Jumping out of bed, she dressed herself hastily, shivering with cold meanwhile. On the previous night Mrs. McCoy had put a great fire in the room, and instructed Laura to leave her bedroom door open and get the good of it. Perhaps if she had known that she was quite alone in that part of the house, she might have done so, for it was shut off from the kitchen half by the enclosed stairway which ran between them. The young minister's bed upstairs was so close to the kitchen stove pipe that occasionally he knocked it down when rising with more than his usual energy; the only other room over the kitchen was usually given up to wandering peddlers, infrequent agents, or casual comers who were not of the aristocratic spare-bedroom degree.

Mrs. McCoy's own bedroom was next to her son's, and as these rooms all lay upon the kitchen side of the house, Laura's wonder was great as the stillness of the place impressed itself upon her. Surely it must be time to get up—she had always heard that country people were early risers—they must be all out at the stable, doing something there. She laid hold upon her chilly garments and made haste to dress herself.

She drew on a sober dress of navy serge, and wound her dark hair about her head in flat braids. Her face was still flushed by the wind, and her eyes glowed with the excitement of the

night's adventure. There was no water in the pitcher on the washstand, but when she would have sallied forth to remedy the omission, she found a covered tin pail at her door filled with water, warm and beautifully clear. In her heart she blessed the thoughtful kindness of the woman with the Scotch voice, realizing that water would probably have frozen if left in her pitcher, and must be brought in daily.

She went out presently and sat a little while by the fire in the Room. It had been quite impossible to raise the window in her bedroom—frost had sealed it down for the winter. She therefore closed the door, pending a conference with the lady of the house. She did not understand the enveloping silence—no noise of wind this morning, no blast to carry the voice of the lake to her; no town clamor of street cars and church bells, and people. Of course the household was awake. The fire told her that, but the absence of all human sounds puzzled her. She did not venture out to the kitchen, but decided to wait for some one to appear.

Sure enough, before long the door opened and the Sabbath countenance of John Hayes appeared upon the scene. Stripped of his nondescript cap and great ulster, he lost much of his size and maturity, and appeared as a youth, slim, assertive, and perhaps a little less than her own height. This pleased her, for his masterful methods of the previous night had roused a certain antagonism within her, which made her rejoice that she could reduce him to his proper place by a simple assertion of physical superi-

ority. However he had been kind to her, he was of her own world, and she had no mind to quarrel with him. She merely kept his shortcomings in mind.

Greeting her cheerfully, the young man advanced to the stove which he opened, prodded and filled from the inevitable wood-box. His calm eyes appraised her, from her trim shoes to her glossy hair, and he very evidently found pleasure in the survey. Laura grew hot under his gaze—not from embarrassment, but from resentment.

"I'll turn my back, Mr. Hayes," she said presently when she could endure no more. There was a fury under the sweetness of her tone, which should have warned him. "I'll turn my back and you can see how you like that view."

Accordingly she rose and turned her back to him, walking over to the frosted window, where she endeavored to scratch a little space clear that she might see what lay outside.

Dead silence reigned in the room. She began to feel childish—and suddenly something came into her throat that was like to choke her. Was this what her mother would have defended her from? Familiarity, boldness, impertinence—surely she need not endure this? Her hand went to her throat, a little uncertainly. She felt helpless.

But John Hayes, wholly guiltless of intentional offence, at last discovered his misdemeanour, and she turned at the sound of his voice, earnest, gentle, penitent.

"Miss West—oh, I beg your pardon! But if

you could only know how long it is since I have seen a girl of your sort. When you have been here a few months you will not blame me—you will pity me. I am naturally a sociable fellow, and it is not often I get a chance to look at, much less talk to, one of the nobility."

She laughed a little, although she rather feared he was making fun of her. She had never had to deal with young men except when supported by her mother's presence, or in very commonplace circumstances of school and neighbourly intercourse, and she had a little difficulty in maintaining her poise.

"Are there no young ladies in the town? It seemed quite civilized, judging by the little I saw of it last night."

"To be sure. But they do not desire my society. I am only a log in the current. I have my Work." (Oh, these young people and their work!) "I have no time for frivolities—they cannot meet me on my ground, I do not desire theirs. Yes, I do—why should I deceive myself? The sound of dance music sets my pulse going. I could play cards the night long, and—there, I won't say it. But there are two natures in every one of us. I often think of Jacob wrestling with the angel, only in my case, if my Jacob prevailed it would be hideous disaster to my soul."

He breathed unsteadily and for a moment she glimpsed something of his eternal struggle, and was afraid. She decided swiftly to avoid this combination of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde as much as possible, and to keep their conversation strictly

to commonplace topics. She let a little silence intervene before she spoke.

"What time is it, please? I seem to have lost track of the hours."

He gave her the time absently, as though his mind still followed its disturbing train of thought. Presently he rose and, saying that he must go to the stable, and see to things there, he left her. She sighed a little with relief. What a strange young man. He would be here each Saturday night she supposed, until the nice weather, when probably he would not arrive until Sunday morning.

Her eyes roamed about the room. There was a tall, much carved organ in one corner, with a neat pile of hymn books on the top of it. The organ stool, upholstered in red plush, and covered with a hand-made tidy, stood squarely upon a hooked rug which depicted a most extraordinary dog with a fiercely bushy tail. There was a horsehair covered couch of heavy walnut, almost priceless in its age and substance; in front of it was another animal-rug—in fact there were five in the room of various shapes, sizes, and colors. What patience they represented! What hours of careful toil! There were a few dark pictures upon the wall, and one exquisite piece of work bearing the signature of a most successful artist. It represented a woman not more than twenty years of age, with thick brown hair and eyes of sea-blue. Little curls lay about her temples; her high cheek-bones and a certain characteristic mould of the face said she was Scotch. Her mouth was large, humorous and

kindly. The laughing baby she held in her arms was beautifully like her, but darker. There was something vaguely familiar to Laura in this modern Madonna. Had she seen it before?

"Gude mornin' to ye, ma'am," said the rich voice of Mrs. McCoy, as she appeared in the doorway. "Ye are lookin' at my picture? It's no much like me noo, but eh, dear, it's less like Kerry! Him that should be a man in strength—"

"It's you, then, Mrs. McCoy. You are just as beautiful now—but different of course. Was Kerry your baby's name? What is wrong with him?"

Laura had the priceless gift of sincerity—and it was perhaps a part of her unvarying success in dealing with people. They never questioned her interest, her truth and her sympathy, for she never pretended. Her questions did not spring from curiosity, but from that great maternal tenderness which was one of her strongest characteristics. It was more than maternal. It was a human echo of Divine Love, reaching out in pity to every helpless and appealing creature whether it might be a child with a broken toy or a wolf with a wounded leg. It was even told of her that once when she had caught a mouse, she let it go alive, although she hated mice—simply because she could not steel her heart to kill it.

"Ay—my only son! Ye wadna ken him by that. Sich'n tall braw lad he was! I mind o' wanst he carried me oot to the stable—me, that weighs over a hundred an' forty pound—an' he carried me oot for a joke."

"He must be strong indeed," said Laura with admiration. The mother sighed.

"They days are gone, noo. Skidding logs—I canna tell hoo it cam' about—but my boy cam' home tae me, broken, two year syne; he hasna the strength o' a child, him that was sae broad an' tall!"

"Oh, Mrs. McCoy!" The girl's voice was deep with sympathy. "How dreadful that must be for both of you! I suppose he hurt his back. Did the doctors think it was altogether a hopeless injury?"

"We had our ain doctor, an' I doot he mismanaged him. It was tak' an operation tae mend him noo, an' oh," she burst forth in what was undoubtedly a most unusual confidence, "I'm feared he'll fret hissel' oot afore I can lay by the price o't."

Into Laura's startled mind there entered a conception of pride which had never before come to her. These two, mother and son, preferred to suffer mentally and physically rather than incur an obligation which was too great for them! From that day Mrs. McCoy's honesty was to the girl's belief, a very Gibraltar of power and stability.

Her eyes dwelt upon the older woman with concern, and her very silence touched that brave heart with peace and comfort. Nothing could so surely have roused the girl's interest in Kerry McCoy as the fact that he suffered and required her consideration.

"Yon picture," went on Mrs. McCoy with an abrupt change of subject, "wis pented by a feckless loon wha wasted hoors upon hoors, wi' naethin' but silly dabs o' pent. Sich'n things!

Maybe's an auld tree wi' a broken branch, or Willie John McGarrity's sheep stannin' oot by a stone pile; maybe's some gude-for-naethin' log hoose that micht ha' dune better gin the pent had been laid on tae itself', usin' a larger brush an' a mair leeberal quantity. He pented a picture o' Auld Jock Andras, that the place is named efter. 'Twas awfu' lookin'—him wi' his tously whuskers and a twisted wee pipe in's hand.! Eh, certes, but it was like him. Weel, he saw me at the shore wi' Kerry in my arms; I was waitin' on Michael tae come wi' the nets—for we set nets for herring they days. Naethin' wad dae him but he must mak' a picture o' us. He wad ha' paid me, but Michael said the picture was o' me an' Kerry, an' nae ither hoose but oors sud hae it. The penter lad laughed and seemed tae think he was giein' us an awfu' fortyin'—yon wee bit o' color! But come awa'—ye must be fair starved. I cam' in tae tell ye the table waited."

So they went out together to the great kitchen, where Kerry's big wheel chair was drawn up to the table and he waited with a lively expectation. He felt sure that the new inmate of the house would be an added interest in his somewhat restricted outlook. It was quite possible she might, indeed, be a priceless treasure to him if she had intellect, and was disposed to give him the benefit of it. His hopes were selfish. It is equally true, however, that he was interested in her personality, because she was a person, and he looked forward to a study of her character without regard to the minor considerations of

congeniality and good fellowship. Something to busy his mind—that was the desire of this man with the shackled body.

As the door opened and Laura entered the room with Mrs. McCoy, his deep eyes measured her instantly, rejoicing in the slender straightness of her youthful figure, because it was free and strong and beautiful. The frank comradelike eyes that met his own lighted up with appreciation; he did not know whether she was beautiful or plain of feature for he gave no heed to that. "I shall like her! She is honest as the day and as wholesome as a flower!" were his mental comments. And he also observed that she forgot to pity him!

She did indeed. One who looked at Kerry McCoy with seeing eyes could not pity him, for his physical injury had in no way deformed his mind or soul—though to be sure, there were times when it weighed very heavily upon him. But his nature was not embittered, nor his life clouded. It had made him older than his years, given him a consideration for others, and taught him to look below the surface of life; it had given him hours of quiet study which would otherwise have been spent in plowing the sandy soil, or, during the long winters, in striving with the industries of the bush. He had met with mighty minds in those intent hours, and their wealth was his.

"It's Miss West, lad," said his mother, and the two joined hands silently. As the big fingers closed about her own, Laura felt in gladness that here was someone of her own world, whom she

could trust, for his face showed power and grave gentleness. She forgot the lines of pain about his eyes, reading only the promise of a great soul which had found the key to the mighty treasury of humanity through suffering and loneliness.

John Hayes, standing over by the roaring stove stirring the porridge watched from under puckered brows, missing nothing of the scene. The bright morning sun shone across the room making it cheerful and homelike. The atmosphere was serene, and the breakfast table was very inviting. He drew the wooden stick from the porridge pot—for with a smooth paddle of wood the porridge was always kept from burning. Mrs. McCoy dished it up, and Laura, for the first time in her life, found herself confronted by a great bowl of the national breakfast food. Kerry, interpreting her blank gaze, laughed pleasantly.

“Don’t scare Miss West with such a bowlful, mother! I don’t believe she is used to it!”

“Are ye no?” inquired Mrs. McCoy. “Weel, dinna tak’it. I cudna insult ye by gie’n ye a wee spunefu’, an’ the rest o’ us wi’ sae muckle.”

“Let me try just a little, Mrs. McCoy. I may with practice, be able to surpass you all, but just at present I’m afraid I couldn’t manage very much.”

“An’ what do ye hae tae your mornin’ meal, maistly?” inquired Mrs. McCoy, with the true housewifely instinct for things new in the culinary department.

Only Kerry noticed the mist that clouded her eyes an instant as she mentally reviewed the well-known morning meal at home. She answered

slowly, but with brave lightness:

"Oh, sometimes bacon and eggs; toast, marmalade, jelly or muffins; tea, or coffee." Mrs. McCoy regarded her with an earnestness she could not fathom. How was she to know that winter-laying hens were unheard of in that district? That orange marmalade was an unknown delicacy, and jelly also a rare treat? That home-cured pork would taste strong and briny after the delicate commercial article; and muffins were altogether a new thing to Mrs. McCoy? Laura went on, with words that reassured her hearer however, "We do not have such lovely things as you do—fish, caught not a mile from home, I suppose? And oh, Mrs. McCoy, I wish—"

"Weel?" said the lady encouragingly, as she paused.

"Oh, do you think you could teach me to make bread like this?" Her color came and went as she spoke, and the two young men watched delightedly. Anne McCoy capitulated without terms.

"Ye shall bak' breid, or ony thing ye wuss, lass—ye hae the hand for't!"

It was agreed then that Laura should be initiated into the mysteries of bread-making upon Saturday. John Hayes, quite unwilling to be left out of the conversation for any length of time, plunged boldly in, telling of various experiences farther up the Peninsula and drawing many dry comments from Mrs. McCoy, whose estimate of character was rarely far astray.

"You will find two little Abercrombies in the Hall of Learning, Miss West. They have quaint

names, and their father has planted queer notions in their heads. Last time I was there, little Benaiah came to me to repeat a verse he had learned—his own choice. He stammers a little, and that did not mend matters: ‘And he—he said: Saddle me—the ass. And they saddled him—the ass!’ ”

Laura laughed. “I had a class in Sunday School at home, and one little fellow in repeating his memory verses, surprised me by saying, ‘Blessed are the miserable for they shall receive misery.’ I suppose he meant ‘Blessed are the merciful—’ Don’t you suppose so?”

“He wasna far oot, yon wee fellow,” put in Mrs. McCoy. “It’s mostly the meeserable that receives meesery—but maybes they are blessed, too, as he said. Weel, the wee Abercrombies are smart eneuch; ye will hae some great thrawn lads forbye, that ye may no care aboot! That muckle loon Angus McLaren—an’ Geordie Waters an’ Jim Boardman—naethin’ wad dae them but a winter’s schoolin,’ I’m tellt. Losh, they need it sair!”

“Need it! I should say so! But they haven’t get sense enough to study—they’ll only be nuisances!” This from John Hayes, with vigor.

“Oh, you won’t let them bother you?” said Kerry gently, as he stirred his tea, and watched Laura with deep interest.

“Why, if they want to learn, they have as much right to learn as anybody has. What makes you think they will give trouble?”

“Because they ken nae better. They’d think it awfu’ knowin’ to be playin’ silly tricks, an’

makkin' fules o' theirsels. But I'm houpin' they may turn oot mair ceevilized than we think."

"Oh, big boys are seldom any trouble. They usually want to learn, and don't make any bother. If they do—well, I don't need to put up with it." Laura spoke bravely but her heart sank at the thought of big boys. How could she teach that quaint little Butterfly Song, and the other dear trifles she had in store for children, while four young men sat and mocked her?

Breakfast over, she watched with relief the exit of the unresting John Hayes. He went to do the chores at the stable, for in this way he paid his score to his landlady—an arrangement which was a great relief to her as she thus had more time with Kerry. Laura reappearing after a trip to her trunk, laid down by the boy some oranges and a couple of magazines.

"I hope you will enjoy the oranges," she said shyly. "We had a crate of them this year, and I brought a dozen or so with me. I do not care a great deal for them myself, but most people like them."

The boy's dark eyes were grateful and she felt repaid. As the day wore on, the storm wakened again in tremendous fury, beating upon the solid old house and bringing the darkness before its time.

Laura tried to occupy herself with writing home to her mother, but finally gave it up, as she had little to tell her beyond the fact of the storm. Idly she sat in the Room by the stove, fighting the deadly pangs of homesickness. She wished she felt free to go out to the kitchen, and enter

into the family circle, but a great reticence constrained her. She could not.

It was quite a relief when John Hayes opened the communicating door and summoned her out to the kitchen. There she found Kerry and his mother side by side. A chair waited for her and she seated herself. Hayes proceeded to the other end of the room and took his place by the window at a small table. He read a portion of Scripture, and then prayed. Such a prayer! Such a passionate, terrified appeal to the Almighty for guidance and protection! Whatever else might be said of John Hayes at least he could pour forth his soul before the Lord with most convincing earnestness. He seemed to feel that the Evil One was ever at his elbow, and in panic, held to the only refuge he knew of. Some special temptation was apparently reaching out to grasp him and he prayed fervently and furiously for strength to resist.

Then he delivered his sermon, which dealt with David's grief upon the death of Absalom, and his sinful indulgence in that grief. His homily was upon this theme and would almost have led one to think that his little flock required correction for a similar fault. Laura, something of a critic, thanks to her mother's teaching, decided that the sermon was quite out of place—intended for special private admonition and not particularly suitable even there. He finished, and left his little table.

“Well, Mrs. McCoy?”

So she was the critic! When prevented from delivering his sermon at the school, did he prac-

tise on the Scotswoman and her crippled boy? Laura was to learn later, that he regularly gave them the benefit of his work, and Mrs. McCoy's hints as a rule, had more to do with his success in the pulpit than the commentators and other abstruse literary diet prescribed for men of his cloth. Mrs. McCoy hesitated, for she was kindly natured and she knew the young man to be fiercely resentful of a candid rending asunder of his architecture.

"Ye are verra young yet," she said gently, with her hand upon her son's, "Ye ken naethin' aboot the hert o' a faither, or ye wad ken that David mourned ower Absalom because he had not held him frae evil—he hadna dune his best wi' him, to mak' a gude man o' him. It was his ain fault he greeted ower, an' the thocht o' his fine son ta'en awa' in the midst o' evil-doin'. Ye might weel ha' showed the brichter side o't—that as Davit sorrowed ower his sinful child, so the Lord yearns ower us, and wad forgie us gin we askit it. But ye wad be weel advised to deal mair wi' mercy an' less wi' judgment, an' leave they questions o' faitherhood till te hae bairns o' yer ain—an' ha' maybes lost yin or twa' them."

He seemed rather crest-fallen, but checked himself as he was about to reply. He sat in thought for some moments in the gathering dusk of the storm. Then drawing out a note book, began to scribble intently, with the same concentrated energy which characterized all his actions, unheeding the others who talked quietly and pleasantly while the fire roared in cheerful defiance

of the howling wind. So came evening, when the tempest died away; night and the silence of the sleeping household; morning, with sun on sparkling snow, and a snapping frost that made the iron door latches scar the adventurous fingers like a white hot brand.

Several new experiences awaited Laura. For the first time in her life she carried a lunch box, for she would be at school all day. She had breakfast by lamplight, moreover, which was a novelty, but then she had to leave for school by eight o'clock at the latest. The keys were given over to her and she found herself in John Hayes' quaint old jumper, for he passed the school on his way up the shore road to his duties yonder in the Peninsula, and she was very glad of the ride. The jumper, something like a sleigh, but smaller, was far more substantial than the ordinary cutter, also less easy to upset. This is a consideration when the snow is piled over fences and drifted into small mountains at frequent intervals.

There were only a few houses in this once busy neighborhood. The days of the lumbering activity were passed. Little remained but the second growth timber and a few pioneers which had somehow escaped the general slaughter. The road passed right between a man's house and his barn in one place and Laura was amused to see the faces pressed eagerly against the windows of the little dwelling.

The owner, Mr. Ben Harris, appeared at the stable door, with a fork in his hand. He was a tall, gaunt man, loosely hung together with

loose lips and even a loose, uncertain handclasp. He saluted the young man, and then was presented to Laura, shaking her hand flabbily, much to her displeasure. He was profoundly glad to "meet her acquaintance" he said, and hoped that she would not be long in coming to visit his household.

"Does he expect me to go and see them, first? That would be rather a queer thing for me to do!" she exclaimed as they resumed their tortuous way.

"Oh, you must not be formal! They will be quite offended if you don't accept the invitation," he returned, carefully guiding his rough coated nag through a gap in a stump fence. "It is almost safe here, in any dilemma, to do the thing inside out. You can get hold of these people only going into their homes and seeing how they live. You would never meet them socially as you do in town, for there is no 'society.' They are queer fish, some of them, but there is so much that is admirable in every one of them that I feel increasingly grateful week after week, for being thrown among them. Don't be stilted, Miss West, give yourself to them in their way, and they will give you the best of themselves in return. Now, here we are at the Institution of Learning, and I hope you will be pleased with it."

A sudden turn in the road revealed a building standing in a little clear space. Across the road lay acres of swampy growth, cedars, balsams and close growing trees, but the school stood in dignity a little apart. It was low, unpainted,

with a small shed in front to serve as porch; two windows were upon each side—oh, a most unpretentious and humble little building!

She disembarked from the jumper, gathered up her lunch box, keys and books, and entered the school. At first her eyes were almost blinded, coming into the semi-darkness from the glare of the sun on the snow, but presently she perceived several children, and an elderly man, standing expectantly by the big old-fashioned roaring stove.

"Mornin', ma'am. Your servant ma'am!" said the Ancient Mariner respectfully. "Name's Thomas Law, ma'am, caretaker of this here 'stablishment, an' hopes you will find everything to your liking, ma'am!"

"I am glad to know you, Mr. Law!" she said, giving him a cold little hand. "This is a delightful fire! I am sure everything will be splendid."

She loosened her furs and proceeded to unbutton her coat, giving bright smiles of greeting to the quiet, quaint little figures gathered about the stove. Inspiration seized her and she gave her belongings into the hands of two or three of them, asking to have them put in place, for Laura suddenly remembered that children love to serve. Besides, their earnest scrutiny was becoming embarrassing. Mr. Law also gazed appreciately at the tall, slender girl with her pleasant smile and capable hands. He found her very different from elderly Miss Brewster, whose sojourn had been one long lament over the vanished glories of her "other" schools.

"D'y'e carry a time piece, ma'am?" enquired the complaisant Mr. Law. "This here engine"—

indicating the school clock—"freezes up o' cold nights. But I'll start her for you every mornin', ma'am, if you wish; then she'll run the day for you, ma'am."

As Laura had no watch, she gratefully accepted the offer, and very soon the Ancient Mariner departed. She glanced about the room, appraising the maps—which were excellent. She wondered at the curious unevenness of the walls, which was indeed due to the fact that the old school was built of great logs, and had been simply plastered over that eruptive surface. Outside, it was boarded very neatly, and, in the intervening spaces, as she discovered later, bats had founded a colony and proceeded to increase and multiply and replenish the neighborhood with an unlimited supply of their nightmare progeny. However, it was too cold for the bats to be lively, and she did not guess their presence for many a long day.

The blackboards were primitive, being literally, boards, blackened with shiny paint, upon which it was very difficult to write. Between the stove and the platform for the teacher's desk, were two double desks, which were large enough to accommodate three scholars each. Along each side wall ran a row of desks, six on each side. The whole room was no larger than Mrs. McCoy's kitchen!

Eight children reported for business and Laura discovered that she had six classes. She learned their names and ages, and proceeded to assign work to them, wondering how in the world she would ever put in the time with only eight chil-

dren to teach. For in the city schools where her experimental work had been done during her term at the county Model School, the classes had ranged from thirty to fifty in number, and all in the same grade. It was her "Work," however, and she felt that she could adjust her vast stores of information to the needs and advancement of these eight.

Of the big boys whom Mrs. McCoy had mentioned she saw no sign. In fact, they never appeared to seek wisdom at her hand, and when she met them "socially," to quote John Hayes, she had cause to be thankful that they had not been earnest in their desire for education—although their lack of it was undeniable.

At noon she opened her lunch box, down beside the stove, and found a tremendous array—sandwiches, cookies, cake, a pie in a saucer and a small cup and towel. She drank from the cup, washed it and dried it upon the towel, which she then hung behind the stove. One of the boys had constituted himself fireman and stoked up vigorously. The little girls informed her that they were always expected to sweep the school at the noon hour. Thomas Law simply looked after the fires. Brooms were therefore produced and the place was well swept. She had to admire the businesslike dexterity of the young women at the brooms. They did not wish her to do anything of this, explaining that they liked the task!

The day fairly flew, and she could hardly believe it was gone when the hands of the old clock showed four. She had forgotten the first em-

barrassment; she liked the children and felt that she could give them what they needed. The simplicity and naturalness of their open admiration touched and charmed her. "I know I shall be very happy here!" she said, as she closed the door after her first day of school. The school door proper was to be locked, but the shed had no door. It was pretty well protected by the building against which it leaned and its low shelter housed the fuel supply. Who would bother stealing a heavy stick of maple or an elm chunk? Then why lock the shed? In times of severe storm it afforded kindly shelter to ratepayers who otherwise never had any value from their school taxes.

CHAPTER IV

BENJY'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

THE short winter day drew to its close. Away across the frozen stretches of the bay the angry sun covered himself with heavy clouds like a naughty boy who has been sent early to bed. The pines flapped their arms to keep up their circulation and meekly bowed their heads for the nightcap which the snow storm was preparing for them. The little old thermometer on the side of the shed already registered eight degrees below zero, and was steadily sinking with the sun. Winter is winter in the old Peninsula.

Laura's eyes took in the encircling vastness of snow piled on snow, and more coming. She looked to the dark line of trees, the far frozen expanse of the unfriendly bay with its furry little islands on the horizon; the forsaken fields with their half buried fences of twisted stumps; the few—oh, very few! little houses set so far apart from each other, yet forming the only life of the place. And Laura's heart dropped with the mercury. Something told her there would be skating in the rink at home to-night—a band, and jolly chums circling like birds, and calling gay greetings to each other. She visioned the

lights, the cheer, the home-y-ness of it all. Poor child! She never once thought of her Work as she plodded desperately through the drifts in the faint track. Her skirts were long, as befitted a stately schoolma'am, and were rather a nuisance in the snow, for occasionally she stepped on them, and they were a dead weight about her.

Finally she arrived rather breathless, at the dwelling of Mr. Ben Harris. The walking from there on was rather better, for there was more traffic (Heaven save the mark!) but the concession was always blocked when snow came, so she afterwards learned.

She had almost passed the house, when a voice hailed her, and turning she beheld a very remarkable figure striding towards her. Mr. Harris, long, lean, with a great coonskin cap that nicely matched his coonskin whiskers, was approaching swiftly, swinging his loose arms like a somewhat dilapidated wind mill.

"Say, Teacher," he roared, as if she had been half a mile away, "Hold on!"

She did.

"I won't keep you a minute," he said as he came up, separating the cap and beard by a most engaging grin, and at the same time modestly averting his head,—but not his eyes—while he relieved his organs of speeeh by ejecting a tremendous amount of tobacco juice with great accuraey and despatch. "My missis she seen you goin' past, and her not knowing you, she ast me would I speak to you. My Boy Benjy is having a birthday party to-night, and would be proud to go for you if you would come."

Laura, who was childishly interested—and girlishly disgusted—at the fate of the tobacco juice, was minded to decline the invitation, but she sensed the genuineness of it, and remembered, in time, her mother's advice, which coincided pretty well with that of the young "Student." Her homesickness too, had somehow been dissipated by this naïve offer of hospitality and she pictured some curly-headed little lad who would like to have the "Teacher" at his tea-party. So she responded with a heartiness which rather surprised her.

"Won't that be nice! Of course I'll come and get acquainted with the children. At what time does the party commence?"

"Oh any time after supper," he answered, increasing the volume of his voice as he rapidly widened the space between them. "My boy Benjy will call for you. Good-bye!"

Kerry and his mother looked meaningfully at each other when Laura expounded the case, but neither of them enlightened her as to the sort of entertainment she might expect. But when after supper she lay down for an hour's rest and then appeared, ready for the party, both caught their breath at the picture she made. Frost and excitement kept the tender flush in her usually pale cheeks. Her wide, candid grey eyes were eagerly expectant. She had a little wave into the hair about her face. She wore a dress of velvet very simply made, yet clothing her with the dignity of that royal fabric. It was deep garnet in color and had no trimming but the fine fluff of lace at throat and wrists.

There were no rings, bracelets, or bangles to distract the eye from the pleasant naturalness of her, and "My Boy Benjy" sitting nervously on the wood box, gaped until his mouth fell open in his simple face.

She was somewhat disconcerted to find him a young man of twenty-one, in all the glory of a stand-up collar and hard boiled shirt. Her amazement was enhanced when she observed that he had neatly disposed the cuffs of his trousers inside his boots, thus achieving a decidedly tapering effect! She was soon ready, and they set out.

He piloted her carefully to the house, which they entered inevitably from the rear, passing through a dark woodshed and a summer kitchen before they finally arrived at a door which filtered light through various cracks and keyholes. This opened into a medium-sized room furnished principally with a cook stove, roaring red, and a small table where a fast and furious game of euchre was the main attraction. "My Boy Benjy" led her on into a dim hall at the end of which were two figures that froze into silence as she passed them on her way into the room whose door her escort opened.

Here she found his mother, a bent little woman with marvellous black eyebrows that worked spasmodically up and down on her forehead, like a window blind on a tight spring. She was standing with arms akimbo, and regarding the bed, where there was exhibited the most wonderful array of eatables that the mind of man could picture! Pies of complexions and dimensions to daunt the boldest, heavy weight cakes that

"mocked the doctor's rules," tarts of the vastness of small hand-basins with warts of jelly in the centre, flanked and supported the old reliable sandwich! From this entrancing sight she turned to greet her guest, and professed herself overwhelmed with joy at the prospect of entertaining her.

"I'm awful pleased you came!" she said, and Laura felt that she meant it. She began to realize how much these people counted on the new face, the new personality, the new interest. In the sparsely-peopled section, one character is a very powerful factor for pleasure or for unhappiness, and she trembled a little at the thought of her isolation and responsibility. "Lay off your things," her hostess went on, and when she had complied, the wraps were laid upon the sewing machine, which with the bed, comprised the furniture of the room. "Do you think will I need more pie? I got fifteen here, an' four more down suller!"

"I'm sure I don't know—" said Laura, rather astonished. "It depends on the number of people you expect, and the size of the pieces you cut, doesn't it?"

"Everybody'll be here from far enough, for they knowed we was going to ast you—unless you looked like one o' them Plymouth Brethren Psalm-Singers. That Miss Brewster was a nawful pious piece—she didn't hold with no fun nor pleasure *of no kind* But anybody can see you ain't like that! Do you dance? Mebbe you ain't used with country people and their ways, eh? I s'pose you're used more with balls and them

kind o' parties. I've heard about them, but I ain't never been to any." She sighed rather wistfully.

"Neither have I—I can't dance," said Laura with a sudden tremendous gratitude for her mother's wise restraint. "You see, I have always been going to school, and lessons in day time don't get any good from too much fun at night, so I have never started at that."

Mrs. Harris politely closed her lips, which had fallen open incredulously, and signified her wonder merely by a spasm of the eyebrows.

"My boy Benjy'll soon learn you. He's an awful good dancer, he is. The girls all likes him—he could get any girl on the Peninsula, but he's a-kind-o' tasty, an' he don't care for everybody. But they are just crazy after him!"

The perishable modesty of the youth in question was saved at this stage by the fact that he had not remained in the room after the formality of introducing the ladies; and the surprising clamor which broke out in the adjoining room effectually changed the topic of conversation. There was a song and the shriek of a most execrable violin, piercing through the din and scutter of heavy boots upon stamping feet. Mrs. Harris regarded it as a matter of course.

"Hear that? I reckon they're steppin' some now. Do you want to watch them?"

The good lady led the way from the room which she then locked, slipping the key into her stocking, and announcing triumphantly that she did not intend to let anybody spile her lunch this time, like they done once afore! In the hall

the same two figures still remained. "Spoonin'!" commented Mrs. Harris briefly. "They's more'n one kind o' fools in the world. That's a harmless kind, 'ceptin' when they turn somebody's stummick with their actin's. Now stand here, so's you kin see 'em dancin'. My land! There's some great leppin' there, but they most ginally gits soupler after lunch!"

No one could hope to be much "soupler" than the grave and serious dancers of that set. They honored the corner ladies and saluted their partners with energy and determination. To Laura they seemed a confused whirl of shifting figures, careering madly about the room. The bare knotted floor encouraged no feeble performance, but lent itself to the most extravagant clogging and step-dancing imaginable. A little sour-faced man sat in a corner with the instrument of torture in his hands, his eyes closed and his face twisted with anguish as he drew forth the mournful remains of the "Irish Washerwoman." Beside him stood "my boy Benjy" intoning vigorously,

"First two ladies
Hop into the middle,
Go dance up and down,
Keep time to the fiddle."—

and more to the same effect. Then of a sudden every lad seized a lass, and whirled her about interminably at his best speed, sometimes in his enthusiasm lifting her quite off the floor. A slight fracas occurred when one gentleman purloined a plug of tobacco from the hip pocket

of another and reduced its dimensions considerably by taking what he called "a little chaw." Laura enjoyed it all tremendously, but in her innocence she failed to see the connection between the growing hilarity and the frequent surreptitious trips made by a number of the men to the outer regions of the woodshed, where in a corner a dim lantern revealed Something which drew most of them frequently and irresistibly.

In the course of time luncheon was served. She was in the state apartment—The Room—and it was a pitiful little effort in the line of elegance. The floor was uncarpeted, of rough pine, with knots standing up like the knuckles of a hand, and slivers, ever ready for the unwary, worked up in the soft wood. Laura had fallen into the clutches of a lady whose chief topic was her stomach, and the pains she had, the medicine she took, the doctors she "doctored" with, and the various foods that disagreed with her. It was that bad she didn't hardly know what to do with it by spells. She couldn't keep nothing on it, she said, impressively. Laura took refuge in sympathetic silence, which seemed altogether the safest for her. Presently "my boy Benjy" appeared and thrust a dinner-plate at her with the air of one who risks his life. This was followed shortly by a highly decorated cup inscribed "Darling" in fascinating gilt letters upon the outside, and containing a dark mysterious brew within. She could see what looked like schools of fish wending their way about in its dismal depths, and surmised that she had been offered the peace-pipe of civilization, and though it sent

her to an early grave she must not shrink before it.

The plate contained a healthy-looking sandwich, one of the hand basin tarts, a piece of raisin pie, a piece of dried apple pie, a slab of very moist black cake, and a crowning glory in the shape of a cookie with a candy in its centre. Somewhat aghast, she glanced cautiously about so see how the others were faring, and found that they had been served quite as generously, though rather less elaborately. While she was considering the advisability of tackling the tart, a young man who was seated near her, passed back his plate for more, having wasted no time on the first instalment! No one seemed to consider it at all unusual, however, and when "my boy Benjy" brought it back to him, he simply said, "Eat hearty, Eli!" and Eli responded fervently, "You bet!"

It was long past midnight when Laura located her hostess and prepared to take her leave. She was very weary—and there was school the next day. So she made her farewells, and truthfully assured Mrs. Harris that she had enjoyed herself most thoroughly, and thanked her for her kindness. Up went the eyebrows like a kite in a high wind.

"Good land! You needn't thank me! I ain't payin' for it!" was the cheerful response. "But come agin, and give us the pleasure of your s'ciety. My boy Benjy he allus did like the teachers, and we'll be real proud to have you."

"Thank you—I shall come!" said Laura, and so she did—but that is another story.

CHAPTER V

FROM BABIES TO FUNERALS

THAT week always seemed to her, afterwards, like a dream. It was so very different from her accustomed routine that the strangeness was long in wearing off. At last came Friday, and she sighed with relief to think that her weary limbs would have a chance to rest. The long difficult walk in the heavy snow, morning and evening, was something she had not counted on—had never thought of it, in fact—and it was over a mile each way. The unrelenting cold was hard to withstand, too, and she had been as tense as a bowstring all week. Another thing had been aching in her heart—there was no letter from home yet. To be sure, the mail came in only on Tuesdays and Saturdays, so evidently her mother had not written in time for Tuesday's budget, and a very panic of homesickness swept the girl as she counted the hours until the next mail would come.

She was much depressed that evening, as she sat watching Mrs. McCoy's fingers flying in and out of her swift knitting. Kerry had gone to bed directly after supper, but his door was not quite closed—his mother never shut him off where she could not hear his call, and always dreaded

unspeakably her necessary absences when he was alone in the house.

Presently Laura came and sat down by her, looking very childish indeed in her weariness.

"Will our talking disturb Kerry?"

"It'll no bother him noo—he's no easy disturbit, without it's some strange voice or sound."

"What's it going to be, Mrs. McCoy—it looks like—why, it is a baby's jacket!"

"Weel, ye ken, I make them, whiles, an' there's always a baby somewhere to weir them!" Mrs. McCoy's voice dropped to the confidential tone one woman uses to another when babies become the topic. "Eh, dear, I'm fine an' glad to make they wee things—this yin is for Mary Cowie—she's John Cowie's wife—an' without a mither or ony weemen aboot her. She's no weel, an' she's awfu' doon-hearted wi' hersel'. Hoo she'll get her sewing dune in time's a problem—she canna come up wi't. But it's no ti' the end o' April, so she's time enouch."

"Mother was always making things for babies too. I used to help her," said Laura, with a little catch in her breath. She would have liked to lean her head on this woman's knee, and feel the rough hand an instant upon her hair. How was she to know that Mrs. McCoy would have liked it also? A great friendship was growing up between the two—one of those slow substantial affections that defy time. "Mother used to send a lot of things to Homes and Charities, and I loved to help her make them. I am wonderfully fond of babies, you know, and charity children need a lot of love, don't they? I'm disappointed

that we have no babies in our own family—I have three married sisters and do you know, they haven't one single baby amongst them!"

"D'ye say so!" ejaculated the other, impressed by the girl's seriousness. "It'll be a sore grief tae them!"

"Dear me, no—they don't want any—that's the trouble!" cried the girl, her big grey eyes full of distress. "You see it's like this. We used to be quite well off, but after father died, the money was—well, scarcer. Julia married a nice fellow, Ted Curry, but they were very poor for a few years, and she said she simply couldn't think of babies then. After a while, his investments prospered, an they have just heaps of money now—and Julia says she is going to have a good time. She and Ted are nice and friendly with each other, but oh!—I'd die if my husband—well, I haven't got one, so I'd better not say anything."

Mrs. McCoy glanced apprehensively at the door of Kerry's room, but Laura's voice was low, and after all, she was not likely to say anything too confidential. She was gazing dreamily at the glowing stove, of which the front door was open, showing the red coals. Presently she went on.

"Then Helen was married, and she turned out to have a voice. She really sings very nicely at concerts and that sort of thing. Her husband is organist in one of the big Toronto churches and they are both interested in the same things. They seem very contented, but they say, or rather she does, that her temperament would

never adjust itself to the care and responsibility of a child. Do you know, I've met a lot of people with what they call 'temperament,' and I can't see anything in it at all! I think it's mostly a hedge to hide behind!"

"It sounds like a fancy sort o' temper," said Mrs. McCoy, measuring one small sleeve against the other. "She'll maybes see different yin o' these days!"

"I hope so," said the girl, doubtfully. Her family was a great care to her. "My sister Grace is next to me, but seven years older, and she married a doctor just two years ago. He is doing well, but Grace says she lives in an everlasting atmosphere of chloroform and other people's sicknesses, and she has no notion of risking her life for the sake of a child. She says they will adopt one if they feel lonely for one later on. I have questioned them all, closely, about it and they seem quite hopeless material. It's rather a shame too, for they all had me to cuddle. I was the baby, and so much younger than they were, that they had all the fun of me. Now I haven't anybody!"

"Well, I wadna gie them up. They didna maybes tell you all the ins and oots o't, and ye might find some day that ye had judged them hardly. And noo I'm thinking, lassie that yer mither wad say bed was the place for you. Tak' yon tumbler o' milk, and drink it. Dinna rise the morn ontil ye wish. Ye can hunt in the pantry for yersel' when ye want breakfast!"

She watched the girl kindly, and when the milk had vanished and the little bedroom lamp

was lighted, a sudden impulse moved Laura. She turned at the doorway and came back, setting her lamp again on the table.

"You are good to me," she said in a low voice. "You are very good to me!"

And she kissed Anne McCoy fairly upon the cheek—and was gone.

Kerry, lying broad awake in his room, pondered many things in his mind. Laura had never been far from his thoughts since her arrival in the storm of the previous week. She was so gentle, yet had such decided, interesting ideas—and she was fond of babies! That was a new point of view to him who saw few babies and cared little for what he saw. Why did she care for them? Evidently she longed for one in her "own family" as she put it, so that she might have a claim upon it, a right to it. Presently his searching mind stumbled upon the theory that women love babies because of their appealing helplessness, and because of the instinctive maternal tenderness they waken, but more because mothers see in these tiny mites a chance. Where they have failed the child shall succeed; where they have suffered, the little one shall be happy. Their own mistakes shall be wiped out in the triumphs of that small Bundle of Possibilities. But what had this to do with Laura? She was a young girl, singularly childish for all her maturity of speech and manner. He concluded that her life with her mother had been lonely perhaps. Books and older people can never give a child just exactly the same abounding companionship that might be found in another child. Kerry

realized all at once the wealth he might have found in a brother or sister.

Laura, sleeping soundly with her dark braids lying like ropes upon the pillow, had no idea how effectually she had diverted Kerry's thoughts from himself. She was not introspective—it never entered her mind to wonder *why* she loved babies. She only knew that she did—loved them whether they cried or sucked their thumbs; and loved them quite as much when they had colic as when they crowed and laughed—more perhaps, for a colicky baby required the care and tenderness which she was longing to give. . . .

There were two days in January that were so exceedingly wild and rough that no one thought of venturing to school. She spent the long hours very pleasantly, playing checkers with Kerry, mending her stockings, drawing quaint little tunes from the rusty old organ, writing voluminous letters to various friends, planning and re-planning her time table in order that no class or subject should be slighted. She became fairly familiar with the secrets of bread making and at times took a hand at the little old churn. To Kerry she was a never failing source of delight. He learned to listen for her careless snatches of song and her frequent boyish whistle. He felt the echo of her radiant joy when things went well, and he reflected her gloom when Benaiah Abercrombie failed to study his spelling lesson, or Melissa Ramsay made ducks and drakes of the multiplication table.

There was a day that Laura never forgot.

The school room was warm with the heat of the roaring old stove. A terrible day it was, of howling wind and driving snow, and bitter deadly cold.

A knock came at the door about the middle of the morning and she opened it to find a man and two women, muffled and snow-wreathed beyond recognition.

Laura brought them in to the heat, helped to undo their wraps, shake off the snow and hang the frozen garments about the stove. The man was her old friend Crombie, and he introduced his wife and a neighbor woman, Mrs. Ramie, explaining that they had come to the funeral.

"Funeral!" repeated Laura astonished, looking from one to the other to see if this was perhaps one of those crude jests she was beginning to recognize afar off. "Why, where—who—"

"It's George Conover," Crombie informed her heavily. "He died with something in his inside, and he's buryin' to-day. That's the burying ground out yonder—didn't you know?"

He showed her through the west window a forlorn snow-swept space with occasional dark gravestones scattered over it. Laura had not observed it before, and now gave it a look that fully appreciated its bleak desolation. She shivered.

"It ain't very nice looking now," he admitted, while the youngsters, particularly the little Crombies, exchanged covertly complacent glances of delight over the interruption of their studies.

"It was to be at eleven o'clock, but Conovers live two miles down the shore so they have

maybe had to shovel out the road in places. We can't make the grave ready till they come, for the snow fills it right up again!"

The two women who were very silent, found seats at the battered old desks, ink-spotted and carved by awkward schoolboy hands years ago, but Crombie was a regular bird of storm, striding uneasily about the dusky room, asking her occasional abrupt questions, and observing critically her manner of conducting the classes. The arithmetic lessons were over for the day, and she was busy with the writing of all the grades. Then the little folks had a ten-minute reading lesson, and some of the others had a short exercise in composition. Here little Benaiah distinguished himself by asking her how to spell "cherry." She wrote it on the board for him, and had him spell it several times.

Then she rubbed it off, and the youngster was delighted to be able to write it again. At her suggestion he also wrote "merry," "berry" and "wherry." This was a simple matter of routine, but Crombie was tremendously interested and pleased.

"Dash, but you know how to put them to it!" he chuckled, winking at his unresponsive wife. "I wisht I'd-a been learned to spell when I was a young shaver. The children all take after me—all they need is a chanct—Say, sing for us, won't ye?"

So the desks were cleared, and the sedate little eight took "Position" and gravely sang a song or two. Then it was noon, and as yet no funeral in sight. She and the children shared their

lunches with their marooned guests, while Crombie scolded between mouthfuls, about the notorious tardiness of the late lamented Geordie Conover.

"He couldn't be on time even at his own funeral!" he stormed. "Been late to everything, all his life, and now he's dead, the neighbors have to sit and wait for him just the same! I don't see why they couldn't set him out into a snow bank in their orchard till better weather come, and bury him when it wasn't so cold and stormy!"

"Oh, Crombie!" remonstrated his wife, much shocked. "How could anybody live in the house, with him *dead* out in the orchard?"

"Pshaw!" he answered with the inevitable courtesy of a man for his wife. "You talk like a fool! Anybody who lived with him when he was living could live much better with him when he is dead, I'm sure!"

Laura reflected that Geordie Conover was not the only one; but she created a diversion by walking over to the little organ and playing by ear, as she often did, some of those old songs which are known to every kindred, every tribe, in the civilized world. Crombie halted in his restless prowling to ask her what she would take to teach his little Dora to play.

"I'll teach her all I know, and welcome. But have you an organ, Mr. Abercrombie?"

"No—but I can get the use o' Mary Cowie's," he told her, and straightway declared that she could begin on little Dora the next Saturday at ten o'clock in the morning.

"Oh, wait, Mr. Abercrombie—you take too

much for granted. I cannot undertake to do this just yet, during the winter months. See Mrs. Cowie about the organ for Dora's practice and I will keep her after school and teach her here when the days are longer and she will not be in the dark getting home."

Crombie was somewhat inclined to look a gift horse in the mouth, but Laura was too much for him. It came to pass, however, that she gave the lessons on Mrs. Cowie's organ, for they two became great friends and Laura was there a great deal.

The funeral cortege arrived during the afternoon, and the school room was filled with hoary-whiskered, fur-coated men, abashed as men generally are in a school room. There were only three women altogether, and they stood constrainedly whispering among themselves, quite ignoring the girl, who was rather uncertain what to do. She could not continue lessons with all these people in the dark little room, so she simply waited. Presently they all filed out in to the stormy afternoon, and she saw them no more. The depression of the day and the event weighed heavily upon her. The dreary cemetery, the shivering cold and general misery of it all, impressed her with a sort of horror. What a terrible country to live in—and die in! And again the homesickness took her in a gust of wretchedness.

Kerry knew it as soon as she came into the house that afternoon, and when she had gone to her room, as she always did to wash and refresh herself he said to his mother:

"Something is wrong with Laura."

Anne McCoy shot him a quick questioning glance. "Laura?" Of course she called him "Kerry" but it was a very different thing for him to use her name so freely. He had done it with a purpose, which his mother understood, and accepted in wise silence. It was his way of telling her something, and although her heart resented the message, she hid the little jealous pain, and told herself it was nothing to be alarmed about. She wanted her boy to be happy, but oh—not with the happiness that would take him away from her! She would have given her life for him—was giving it every day—only to find that he turned unheeding from her at the glance of a pair of troubled grey eyes.

She moved about the kitchen, preparing the early supper, and presently Laura came forth, refreshed in body, and correspondingly happier in mind. She always changed her dress after school, and to-night she wore a dark shirt with a blouse of scarlet cashmere, and brightened the old room amazingly.

She told them the day's experiences, and found a great relief in sharing her opinions and impressions with these kindly listeners. The night was wildly stormy, but the cheerful glow of lamp and fire defied the elements. The old log house was as solid as confederation.

CHAPTER VI

ALGEBRA AND FRIENDSHIP

IN his big wheel chair, Kerry sat idly by the table, watching Laura arrange and re-arrange her papers. He no longer went to bed at his usual hour, for to do so would be to miss the pleasant evening chat with her. He lived the tedious day through for the sake of this, and beguiled the wakeful night hours with the memory of it.

It was a relief to Mrs. McCoy that she was not forced now to leave him alone when she went to the stable to do the evening chores. Such a relief to know that he did not sit there, solitary, brooding upon his helplessness! In place of this, he had begun to imbibe a new philosophy of life, through which he might ignore his misfortunes and be happy with what blessings he had. And his mother was correspondingly grateful.

She lighted the old lantern, and slung the milk-pail over her arm. In her short skirt, close fitting cap and jacket she looked very quaint, but very efficient.

"I'm awa' to milk noo, but I'll no be long gone," she said, and the two at the table looked up cheerfully.

"If you are out there longer than usual, any time, I'll be coming to see what's wrong. I'm always afraid something may happen to you out there alone," said Laura.

"Nae fears—the puir beasts hanna that much feed intae them ta mak' them ower gay—they're quate eneuch."

As she opened the door the storm roared boldly in. She closed it, and left them to their books, the lamplight and the pleasant crackling fire. Kerry had a personal question to ask, and he lost no time about asking it.

"Laura—would you mind—may I call you that? I'd like to—unless you object. I'd like to, very much!"

Surprised, she looked at him in silence. Since she came he had never called her by any name! She was little used to the formal "Miss West" which had only come to her in the last few months, ready made with the dignity of her profession, and sometimes felt that she had hardly grown up to it.

"I suppose I *am* taking a liberty in asking—don't think of it again," he said quickly, interpreting her expression to be a rebuke. She laughed.

"What liberty? I suppose it is, perhaps—but I have been calling you 'Kerry' all the time and never thought anything of it! It really doesn't matter to me. It would be rather nice if you and your mother called me 'Laura'—more like home, where everybody called me that."

He made a little face. I'm not asking any privileges for my mother—I want this for myself,

because I have never had any friend of my own age. I would like to have your friendship, and I would like you to let me use your name."

"All right," she said indifferently. "You had the friendship anyway. I don't suppose I would ever have noticed what you called me, unless my attention had been drawn to it. And now look here—" she spread out various letters and circulars—I'm in trouble, fierce and deep!"

"What's the matter?" he inquired with lively interest.

"Matter indeed! Just let me ask you a plain question—am I a busy person, or am I not? Do I need something to occupy my time, or am I reasonably safe from the mischief that is usually found for idle hands to do?"

"Well, to answer with due regard for the plain unvarnished truth—"

"That's the kind!"

"I suppose you have a certain amount of time on your hands which might be described as leisure; that is, time in which you can do as you wish to do. But even your leisure is occupied well and worthily. Does anything unpleasant threaten to destroy it?"

"I should say it is unpleasant! I'm just as busy as I want to be, and nobody should be any busier than that; but mother seems to think my brain will wither away if I don't use it constantly, so she has arranged a course for me with a Correspondence School—fancy! And I've been at school, one kind or another, as long as I can remember!"

"A Correspondence School!" he repeated, with

delight in voice and eyes, as she handed him a typewritten communication with the formidable letter-head beloved by institutions. He scanned it eagerly, hungrily—the paper that to her signified only an unwelcome burden!

"I'm to take lessons in Latin—and Algebra! I hate Algebra—and I'll never, never understand it! Some brains are like that—with a sort of bald spot in them, where the ability that should be, isn't." She spread out her hands helplessly, enmeshed by her own words. "You know what I mean anyway. Likely there is some study that you never understood properly, either. . . . I don't see any sense in saying that if A plus B is equal to C minus D, find what X is! I suppose I don't see through it the right way, but then, I don't want to! I am busy enough with the school just at present. Perhaps when I'm more experienced, and things are going there like clockwork, I might feel more—but no. I don't need to say that. I'd never in the world *want* to study Algebra!"

She flung down the long envelope which had contained the documents, and leaned back in her chair with a little petulance. Just when she had imagined herself free at last from the life-long bondage of school-books, behold! They threatened her again!

"Did you ever study Algebra, Kerry?"

He raised his eyes from the paper, and looked at her with such an intensity of hopeless desire that she caught her breath, startled. He longed unspeakably for this chance—this chance which she scorned for herself! He was one of those

who would ever "follow Knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost bound of human thought," with a very passion of delight in the pursuit. Hampered by poverty, misfortune and circumstance, his soul yet leaped with eagerness to seize the treasure, which was, alas, not for him but by the irony of fate, offered unsought to one whose only concern was to evade it!

With an effort he replied to her question, although she had indeed forgotten it herself in amazement over the new idea.

"Yes. I studied it a little before I was hurt. I studied Latin too. When I was sixteen we had a teacher here who stayed after school closed, in June, and studied all summer long, to go to College in the fall. He wanted to be a veterinary surgeon—I don't know what success he had; he helped me a great deal in many ways. I was not attending school then, of course—hadn't time. When he went away he left a lot of his books. Lately I have neglected them. I love to study, but it seemed to take all the joy out of it when I remembered about myself. What's the use?"

"Oh, but this is the very time to study and get ready! When you are well and strong again you will be thankful that you have not wasted the chance. You will be all ready to go ahead then with whatever you undertake to do!"

"When—" he repeated with unhappy emphasis, drooping in his chair. "I used to build on that hope, but it is only mockery! There is no way out—nothing but a few years of this—"

His thin hand indicated the chair, the couch

and the little bedroom: perhaps in his mind's eye he included the grim burying-ground behind the school.

"No—oh no! How can you say it? If you really thought that, you wouldn't—you couldn't go on—"

"And I can't!" he cried desperately. "To sit here hour after hour without hope for anything beyond an endless procession of such hours! If I were half a man I would find some way to mend matters—or end them!"

"But you wouldn't—not that, Kerry!"

He shook his head; he was not a hero, and not a craven, either, but youthful and very human.

"Nothing that would hurt my mother, you may be sure. Besides, I do not really want to whine. If I can't get rid of my burden, there is still something I can do, I hope—"

"Bear it like a man, of course! But Kerry, you know, you exaggerate the situation—it isn't hopeless by any means."

"No, I suppose it isn't," he admitted. "But I get thinking about it, and being idle, my thoughts are occasionally despondent. Still I can usually see the bright side of things. I have my wonderful mother—a good home here, and many blessings to be sincerely thankful for. But a man wants to work and be the bread-winner. I—I—the days when I worked hard, and went to bed at night tired out—then I felt proud! I was proud of my strength—well—it is no subject for comment now!"

Laura felt troubled. The situation was quite

beyond her. In the little silence that fell, she sought about for some word of encouragement or sympathy. Things are never really as bad as we think they are!

"I understand—" she said slowly, uncertain how to express her thought, "But don't you see, Kerry, it's only your body after all!"

"Only my body! What else would it be? A man doesn't amount to much without a body!"

"Perhaps not. But what if it had been your mind? The accident that hurt your spine might have affected your brain instead! What good would be a perfect body, with the mind paralyzed or diseased? Or think—if your soul were darkened by some dreadful sin, or inherited disgrace wouldn't that be worse? Don't you see why I say it's *only* your body—the least important part of you, after all? And it can be cured, I'm sure. Uncle Gregory, Dr. John Gregory, treats cases like yours. He is wonderfully successful."

The boy's eyes glowed at the mention of the great man's name, but he said nothing. Famous surgeons are not for the service of people to whom the necessary fee would be a small fortune—and yet because Laura had said it, the possibility seemed actually to take substance, that some day those wonderful fingers might seek out the cause of his disablement, and make the coming years a joy to him rather than a long punishment.

"Well, that's quite enough about me, this time," he said with a characteristic twist of his mouth. "Talk about something pleasanter. When

are you starting in on your Higher Education?"

"I'm not starting in at all, unless you'll go in with me," she answered firmly. "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing—and I'm not taking any chances on this Algebra! I don't mind studying if it's for any particular object. But studying just for the sake of forgetting again presently is a woeful waste of energy—both ways. I've had my nose in a book all my life—and I'm sick of it!"

"What about the teaching—no nose in a book there?"

"Oh, never mind making fun of me—teaching is giving out information—it hasn't anything to do with learning!"

"Oh, excuse me," said Kerry politely. "I must have had a mistaken idea about it. But you make it all so clear—"

She laughed gaily. "Oh, I'm a wonderful person to be in charge of a school! I won't try to explain what I meant, for you know very well. I love teaching, but I want a little rest from being taught. I want to forget the very look of an examination paper, except the rear view, when it's headed away from me. I almost ruined my eyes cramming up Psychology for the Christmas examinations when I was trying for my certificate, and I have a nightmare about once a week yet, dreaming that I have failed! I don't intend to go back to the treadmill again. Mother has made all arrangements, so I suppose the course will be sent right on—but you can just go ahead with it, and earn my undying gratitude!"

"And what will your mother say to that?" he questioned, so amused that he forgot to take the project seriously. Laura's wide eyes were full of relief.

"Oh, mother—" she said with a wave of her hand. "She won't mind if I explain that I got you to take it off my hands. She will know I have been too busy myself. I'll do a little Latin once in a while—I don't mind Virgil when I can make out what it is about, but no Algebra will get any welcome from me—no indeed! So that's settled," she concluded briskly, returning the papers to their envelope. "Now, help me to mark these spelling papers—mark for writing and neatness, too."

"Then you must explain your system to me. When it's a spelling test, how can you mark for writing and neatness too?"

She handed him a blue pencil which was sadly lacking in point, and a cherished object which she invariably described as a pen knife. Her pitying glance caused him great amusement.

"Do you suppose you could sharpen a pencil without more particular instructions? Or must I show you exactly how to do that, too?" she asked with pardonable sarcasm.

He accepted all with meekness. "Please, Teacher, I could make a better job of it if you would hold my hand and keep me from cutting myself, although this weapon seems more suited for a bruise than for a wound. I may have to exert considerable force upon this pencil before I get it properly trimmed."

She laughed, but inwardly she marvelled at

him. A few minutes ago he had been a man, desperately rebelling against his fate. Now he was a boy again, teasing, jesting lightly. Was the anguish then so slight that he could banish it without effort, or was he of such mighty mould that he held even great emotions subject to his will? Or had he in these two years learned the mastery of himself through successive bitter trials? Certainly he had put away his troubles for the present, and his cheerfulness impressed her more than his despair had done.

When the pencil was sharpened, she showed him the secrets of marking examination papers, and they discussed various points in connection with the school. This was a regular occurrence; they overhauled schemes for school government, balanced time tables, and many weighty subjects as night after night the lamplight glowed upon their bent heads. Her Work was always a tremendous responsibility; so much so that her eight defenceless pupils were in danger of being red-taped to death, for she hedged them about constantly with much formality of routine and precise adjustment.

Although Laura felt at ease with Kerry, and quite comfortable in his presence she had never overcome her first feeling of constraint with John Hayes. He had not appeared at all on the second Sunday of her stay in the Peninsula, having remained with a dying lumberman in his need. Thereafter he came quite regularly, and took her to the "preaching" with him in the jumper. She played the "origin" for the little handful of people who gathered in the

old log school for praise and prayer, and was glad to do it, for they interested her more and more as time passed. She was richer for every life that touched hers, as a garden is richer for every sunbeam that hovers over it, and every cloud that spills gentle tears upon it.

Even from John Hayes she gained something—caution, perhaps, and reserve, and a great respect and desire for a chaperon, at least when in his company. She objected very much to his assured manner, the complacency with which he took it for granted that she felt pleased with his attentions. She had for some time been revolving various schemes for taking Mrs. McCoy to church on Sundays, thus effectually breaking up the tete-a-tete, besides giving Mrs. McCoy a welcome change. But what about Kerry? His mother would not consent to leave him alone, simply for her own enjoyment. |

Laura was not thinking of these things, however. As she folded the papers and filed them away, the old clock struck shudderingly—sound-
ing each note with unmistakeable reluctance.

“What ever is keeping your mother? I had no idea it was so late,” she said, going to the door with the intention of looking out. Voices sounded—someone was coming with lantern and milk pail—she threw open the door and Mrs. McCoy entered, followed by a small retinue of man and dog. Laura recognized Francie McAlister and his “wee doge Jakie,” for Crombie had given her a liberal description of them.

“You’ll know Francie when you see him,” he had told her, judicially, “for he’s a wee, wrinkly

withered-up, narrow contracted little feller with a squint—and his dog is just like him!"

His squint was so pronounced indeed, that the affected eye had almost disappeared. He made no acknowledgement when Mrs. McCoy presented him to Laura, but sat cautiously down on a chair by the stove after acquitting himself of a very small nod in Kerry's direction.

"Ah, Jakie, ye wee rascal! Get up and lay doon, wad ye?" he said to his dog, with a voice and accent more thoroughly Scotch than anything Laura had yet heard. With a whimper Jakie thuddled his paws on the blue-overalled knee while he stretched his nose towards his master's face. The results were immediate, for Francie twisted painfully away, protesting, "Ow—ye awkward deevil! Doon wi' ye! D'ye no ken ye're on the rheumatic knee? Awa'— awa'—"

He groaned considerably, caressing the invalid knee, while the dog with a disgusted snarl subsided at his feet. Except for Laura's wide-eyed interest, no attention whatever was paid to this bit of by-play. The others were used to Francie—used to Jakie too, with his ill-favored mongrel countenance and his vicious jackal temper. A most abominable beast he was, determined to lie at Francie's feet under any and all circumstances—and woe to the unwary toe that disturbed him!

Francie was the hewer of wood and drawer of water. He worked, more or less spasmodically, upon this place, attending to tasks which were beyond Mrs. McCoy and helping wherever help was needed. He was not a woman-hater—he

did not trouble himself to be that; but as far as was possible he ignored the sex, which would have been clever if it had been deliberate instead of constitutional. It was laziness—women bothered him! He did not serve Mrs. McCoy—his labor and loyalty were towards his old friend Michael McCoy, of whom he was wont to say that “for an Irishman, he was a guid yin—ay.”

Mrs. McCoy strained the milk carefully into the shallow pans and set them away. Then she washed, rinsed and scalded the milk pail with minute ceremony and put *it* away. The lantern, extinguished, was hung in the shed and at last she was ready to take her knitting and confer with her henchman as to the duties which faced him.

“It’ll be firewood, first thing,” she said briefly.

He nodded, drawing out a very small black pipe, a well-whittled plug of tobacco and a knife as battered and scarred as himself. Taking a splinter from a stick of wood in the wood-box, he proceeded to clean out the pipe, preliminary to his indispensable little evening smoke, caring nothing for the likes and dislikes of others. Laura gathered up her papers. She disliked tobacco, and judged that Francie’s brand would be particularly obnoxious.

“Sit still—” said Kerry in a low tone. “He won’t be ready to smoke for half an hour yet.”

“Dear Sirs!” exclaimed Mrs. McCoy to Francie with surprise. “Ye hae the auld pipe yet! Ye must be gey cautious wi’ it—or hoo d’ye keep it sae weel?”

He squinted contemplatively at it. “It’s unco

strong; ay—a verra strong pipe!"

Kerry and Laura exchanged glances of amusement, while the unconscious Francie leaned back in his chair regarding his treasure affectionately. It was undeniably a strong pipe!

"Are ye wantin' maple? It's unco deep snow
noo tae gang tae the bush efter wood—green
wood for winter fires—!"

"Weel, I hae some dry to pit wi' it," answered the widow capably, and the two launched into a discussion of the virtues of birch and elm, pine and oak. Meanwhile, Jakie lay in his place, emitting occasional whines and groans, or arousing himself to scratch a little. He also had a remarkable strength—but of this the less said the better. It was evidently a case of "Love me, love my dog," for Francie said presently:

"Jakie'll no be awa' frae me the nicht? He'll sleep on my coat at the bedside, or on my feet, gin they get cauld afore mornin'. He's an awfu' feelin' dog—ye must mind an' be ceevil tae him, or he'll tak' a pet and awa' tae the bush!"

He glared darkly around, aiming this warning unmistakeably at Laura, who promptly decided that the time was not far distant when she would summon sufficient incivility to rid herself of Jakie, temporarily at least!

With great deliberation he lighted his pipe, and when he looked up from this congenial task, the girl had disappeared.

In the days that followed, Francie showed himself to be almost indispensable. He drew up wood from the bush with old Job and the colt. He sawed and split conscientiously and "wrought

like a man," to use his own words. Mrs. McCoy trusted him enough to leave Kerry with him occasionally so that Laura's Sunday difficulty was overcome. Mrs. McCoy went to church with her in the old jumper, and John Hayes had neither opportunity nor excuse for personal conversation. And Kerry seemed glad to stay with Francie—he wilted a little when there was no man but himself about the premises.

There came a pleasant wintry Saturday when Laura went with the older woman on one of her rare trips, and with faithful old Job hitched to a jumper of great antiquity they travelled over to see Mary Cowie. It was the beginning of a strange silent friendship. Mrs. Cowie was not demonstrative, but like all repressed natures she had a wealth of affection to lavish upon some one—and in this case it fell upon Laura.

Her story was unusual, yet commonplace. A minister's daughter, sheltered, ignorant of the book of life and proportionately romantic, she had woven a halo about John Cowie when he came one winter to drive her father about the circuit—the good man being laid up for repairs with a broken arm. In the spring they had gone quietly to a nearby town where they were married. In books this is very romantic, but in real life it is a miserable and unhappy way of doing, as Mary soon discovered. If she had confided in her busy father or even in her somewhat narrow and snobbish mother, they would certainly have seen to it that she knew the sort of life she proposed to enter *before* she entered it. As it was, she found out afterwards—and it was not the

rosy dream she had imagined. But because she had done a thing so contrary to the wishes and judgment of her parents, she hesitated—refused to acknowledge the extent of her error. Only John knew—and he was not likely to forget!

The wild, forsaken countryside, with its empty days and silent nights; the humdrum round of small domestic duties; the absence of those trifles which had formerly made her life; all had made a cumulative case against John—she could not help it. And whereas she had imagined him to be a sort of Viking—a hero, he was only a plain man of decent honest characteristics, unremarkable and unpretentious. A picturesque villain might have made her happier—at least she would have had the supreme joy of breaking her heart over him, instead of which she was breaking the hearts of both.

It was a small log house, with low ceilings and narrow windows. The dark little rooms were precise and formal in furniture and arrangement, although their simplicity cried out for naturalness and ease. The splendid old fireplace had no inviting chairs near it, no braided rug with kindly sleeping cat to delight the eyes—not even a primitive bench or stool to coax twilight confidences and caresses from yearning hearts. Mary had denied herself completely the great joy of making a dwelling homelike. Laura, as their friendship progressed, found herself full of pity for John.

From the time of that first visit with Mrs. McCoy she seldom failed to spend Saturday with her new friend. It was not far beyond the school

to the Cowie home, through wintry birches and clannish balsams, over drift-buried fences and frost-strangled creek. And so the winter wore away with daily routine of lessons and snowy roads; of Sundays when the uneasy John Hayes filled the horizon; of fierce storms and mighty winds; of intervals of kindly sky, and sun that grew in strength—until the end of March brought thaws and Easter.

CHAPTER VII

RETURN—BOTH WAYS

A BERCROMBIE went to town with Laura in order to pay over her immense salary, for the school money was kept in the local bank—and Crombie had the interest for himself. No wheat or steel magnate who reckons his wealth in millions knows more of affluence than Laura did when she counted her money excitedly, to be quite sure that the bank clerk had made no mistake. Her first money! And she had earned it. Honestly and worthily, she had done her best to earn it—and she had it. At the rate of \$275 a year it is not hard to calculate her income from New Year's until Easter. Even when the amount for board was deducted, it made a very fair total.

In those days school teachers were given a reduced rate on railways when a certain formula was presented, signed by the trustees. Laura had just such a certificate, but she scorned to use it—she had lots of money! She felt very important and “financial” as she handed a battered ten-dollar bill to the man in the ticket office—not that he seemed to be at all impressed!

When she said “I want a return to Dundas,” he merely elevated one eyebrow, languidly

scratched the territory just west of his right ear and said—

“Return? Both ways?” and so she had a return—both ways.

It was a long trip, with several delays and changes; with slush underfoot and cinders overhead at the occasional stations where she had to wait for trains that had never been on time since time first became a feature of travelling. As she left the lake country behind and jolted further south, she found the slush changing to mud, and the falling snow became rain. At intervals she investigated to see whether the hard little roll of money was still in the place where she had put it—and it was always there. The cars were crowded, noisy, overheated, and she failed to take the customary amusement out of her fellow-passengers, because she was quite alone—more lonely than she had ever thought possible. And she was so hungrily homesick!

Oh, homesick—it seemed as if she could not wait, now that she was so near, for the welcome on her mother’s face, and the happiness of being with her again. She had never realized her need of that mother-love, until absence had shown it to her. When the train, three hours late, drew into the familiar old town, and she saw the beloved little figure on the platform in the dim religious light of the station lamps, a lump that was quite as big as her roll of money, came into her throat and almost choked her. So much had happened, so many new experiences had touched her—she could hardly believe that the old life waited serenely, unchanged since she had

stepped out of it three months before!

At last she stood in the warm, bright little room where every article of furniture was an old friend, and it seemed as though she had been away but an hour. Swift tears sprang to her eyes—and there was almost a sob in her voice as she cried, "Mother!" and flung herself into the waiting arms that had never failed her.

It was soon past, this little demonstration, and seemed to relieve the situation. She felt quite like herself again, as she and her mother chatted gaily over their belated supper, and laughed with perfect understanding over her descriptions of scenes and characters in the new sphere of action. She imitated the inimitable Francie, with the old grey cat for a reluctant Jakie; she reproduced the ceremonious Thomas Law to the life.

"It's so new and different and interesting, that I didn't have time to get homesick—but I just felt that I couldn't stand it if that old train wasted much more time getting me here," she said at last, dropping to the little stool and laying her head childishly against her mother's knee. "It is really very pleasant at Mrs. McCoy's, but oh mother—it is good to get home! That's how to find out just what home is—go away from it for a while!"

Her mother silently stroked the dark hair, looking contentedly and proudly at the young face upturned to her. Those grey eyes were as candid and unafraid as ever—there had been no shock, no rude awakening to the ugly things of life. Her girl had come back to her as she went away—wholesome, honest and earnest.

"To bed now, dear," she said as she had said hundreds of times in past years. "You must get your beauty sleep. The girls are coming to-morrow to see you."

"Oh, and I have such a lot to do in the morning! Did my parcel come, mother—the one I ordered from Toronto?"

"Yes, dear, it is in your clothes-closet waiting for you. Away you go now!"

Laura laughed joyously—it was so good to be home again! She caught up the old cat. "Run to bed, you naughty Peter! Sleep sound—renew your youth like the eagle, for I'm going to play pitch-and-toss with you to-morrow! Good-night, mother. Don't sleep too late, for we mustn't waste a minute of these few days. Night-night!"

They kissed affectionately and parted, each going to her own room. Laura moved about in her little nest, touching the mirror, the curtains, the chairs, even the well-worn rug, with fingers that could hardly convince her that it was in truth her own bedroom. So often in dreams she had come back—and so often the awakening had undeceived her. This time it was real—the home, and the mother who made it home. Teaching—well it was not so very unpleasant, but she did not want to go away from home again, ever. "What's the good of a home if I have to be away from it?" she asked herself after the lamp was extinguished and she lay in her own little bed unsleeping. "Yet I would not have thought of that if I'd never been away from it, I suppose. And right now, if something happened to prevent me from going back to my work, I would rebel!"

(She no longer Worked with a capital W.) "It's just that mother is different from most mothers—and so I mustn't be a 'quitter.' I'll go back, and finish out my year. After that—"

Visions—dreams of great things to be accomplished, and a world that would some day own her ability! Teachers are not usually famous, but she felt that she was built for success. Everyone thinks that—at nineteen. She was weary, but she did not sleep. The noise of passing vehicles, the clang of distant street cars, the voices of late pedestrians came to her through the slightly raised window, and seemed strange after the silent nights at Andrews' Bay.

Her mother, in the room across the hall, lay and stared into the memory-haunted darkness where baby Lauras played again with rattle and spoon, or trotted to kindergarten; where school-girl Lauras strove with fractions and homework—and where at last the flesh-and-blood incarnation of them all crept to her and cuddled in beside her, to be clasped in mother-arms for the rest of the night.

The morning was very busy. How they talked—searching each other for signs of change and rejoicing to find the old well-loved characteristics unaltered. The parcel was opened and the contents spread abroad in the little upstairs work room where the sewing machine stood. There Julia found her in the afternoon, busily happy among her treasures.

"Lollie, my dear—" It was the old baby name, in the glad warm tones of affection. Julia's face melted from its wonted cold com-

posure, for she loved deeply her young sister. Stately in her furs and velvets she stood in the doorway, with outstretched arms. Laura ran to her.

"I'm so glad, Julia!" she cried with a hearty kiss. "It is so nice to see you—you look lovely!"

Julia was indeed a charming woman, of poise and dignity. She had no sharp corners. She bore herself with the easy grace of one who is an acknowledged leader. Yet always there was a certain restraint — coldness — aloofness, that marked her dealings with the world in general. She rarely let herself go—the recovery was too difficult. With Laura she was free, happy, comradelike.

"What is all the dry goods for, child?" she asked in some amusement as she slipped her great black furs from her shoulders and laid them across a chair.

"Come on into my room, Julia, and leave your duds in there," said Laura disrespectfully referring to these expensive articles. As they crossed the hall cheerful voices hailed them, and Grace and Helen came laughing up the stairs. Laura broke away, running towards them with a cry of delight.

"Hurry—hurry! I can't wait for you—I've been just hungry for my own people!" she cried, taking hold of them eagerly, and kissing them in turn.

"It seems to agree with you, anyway!" said Helen, arranging herself after Laura's emphatic embrace. "Bless me! You must have gained pounds up in that wilderness!"

They stood back from her in the little hall, regarding her critically, to see wherein the three months had changed her, and preparing to inform her with sisterly candor, of whatever they might discover. Julia nodded.

"And color. You are getting to be very pretty, Lollie—quite like the miniature of mother before she was married."

"Indeed she looks more like you, Julia," Grace contributed, while the color mounted in the girl's cheeks at the unexpected words of admiration.

"Do you think so, girls? I'd love to be pretty like Julia—"

"Wish for something more satisfactory, dear," was the gentle response, and the family beauty proceeded into the little bedroom to dispose of her wraps. "You have a charming sincerity of manner now, that is far more attractive than any beauty—and it won't fade. What more do you want?"

"Well," said Laura confidentially, "I'd like to be a glorious beauty—the kind you read about—'the most beautiful girl our hero had ever seen'—I notice that the hero always is swayed by the 'lovely face' or the 'wonderful eyes'—or some other superlative charm. I never did read of a heroine who was plain in feature or commonplace in manner. It's discouraging!"

"I'm sure it must be—up in that snowy wilderness among trees and rocks—do you ever see a man at all?"

"I see them about as often as they see me—and I'm as beautiful as most of the ladies of that region," answered Laura, non-committally.

They strayed back again to the little workroom, where with one voice they exclaimed over the flannel and white wear.

"Baby-clothes!" said Grace, round-eyed. "What in the world is it all about?"

"Orphans, Lollie? I always thought you would adopt some!" Helen began to hum a cradle song to herself.

Julia's quick eyes scrutinized it all, but she made no comment.

"I thought you would all be full of curiosity," Laura said laughing. "These baby-clothes are for a baby!"

"You don't say so! An Indian papoose, or an Eskimo?" jibed Grace, picking up a little dress and caressing it gently.

"Hardly. Andrews' Bay is only about one hundred and thirty miles from here—not quite in the Arctic circle! As for Indians, they have their reservation further up the Peninsula—I never see any. No, these are for my friend Mary Cowie's baby—I told you about her in my letters home."

"Oh—the minister's daughter—what is she like, Laura?" asked Helen, curiously.

"Tall—dark—quiet. She seems old, too, for twenty-six." Laura answered thoughtfully, recalling the weary eyes of her friend. "She gave me some money to buy things ready made for her baby, but I thought it would be so much nicer to get the materials and make the clothes. I knew you girls would help me, and one can have such dainty little garments by making them, compared with the 'store' articles."

She drew a long breath of enjoyment. Grace looked up from the fine little dress to ask with genuine interest—

“Who told you what to buy—or does inspiration flourish in that excellent climate?”

“I know a little myself,” said Laura with due modesty, “and Mrs. McCoy advised me.”

“What is *she* like, Lollie?” they asked her. “Tell us what sort of people they are. How do you put in the time? Don’t you get lonely?”

She sat upon her little white rocking chair, the central figure in the room, acknowledged for the first time as a woman like themselves. She told them about the old log house and the tiny log school. She made them feel the wintry glory of the lake, windswept, ice-bound. They heard about the forlorn little burying ground, and the primitive “preachings” in the school house, when bearded men crowded into low seats where on week days primer pupils strove with the mysteries of “a cat,” “a hat,” “a rat.”

“But what about Mrs. McCoy?” persisted Grace, not that she cared to know, particularly, but that she loved to hear the girl talk.

“She’s great!” said Laura with enthusiasm. “It’s a good many years since her husband died, and she runs that farm—has run it all this time—herself, with the help of her son, and since his accident, with the help of an old Scotchman, Francie McAllister. And girls, she’s beautiful! I suppose she must be between forty and forty-five years of age, straight, slight, strong. She has splendid white teeth, and eyes that are a regular sea-blue; and her hair—you should see it!

Thick, reddish-brown *and* curly! She let it down for me one day—I begged her so. She has the pretty Old Country color in her cheeks—I love to watch her. Tall, too, and quick in her movements—”

“Bless me—what a woman! They are all tall there, aren’t they? They must be, to see over the snow drifts!” said Helen, rattling on the sewing basket for thread, as she proceeded to hem a little petticoat.

“No, they are not a race of giants. There is Benjy Harris, not as tall as I am, and Mr. Hayes, the Methodist student—he is not a big man either.”

“Who is Benjy Harris?” said Julia with difficulty. The sight of all the dainty paraphernalia of babyhood had penetrated her armor, and touched her in a very vital place. She was older than the others, and a woman of deep emotions. Of late she had longed hopelessly for a child, with a longing that would not be put away.

“Benjy Harris? He is an only son and has seven sisters to help him bear the responsibility. They adore him—so does his mother. Even his father is impressed with himself for being the parent of such a child! Benjy is an average youth, stout and ruddy. His seven sisters are also stout and ruddy—they are quite a handsome family, and I’m sure I don’t know where they get it, for the father is as long as a sermon and as loose as a bunch of string! And the mother, poor soul, is little, and tired-looking.”

“But do you ever have any fun? How do you put in the time?”

"Well," countered the girl, "how do you put in the time? You have your daily duties—I have mine. I start for school about eight every morning for the walking is heavy. I am back at night about five, for I usually get the next day's work ready before leaving the school. I make out monthly reports according to a form—write them all by hand, which is no small task. Each child gets one. I have weekly examinations for every one of my six grades—sometimes only one scholar in a grade. Then if any are sick I go to see them. I give music lessons to Pandora Abercrombie—"

"Heavens!" ejaculated Grace, "what a name!"

"Isn't it, though?" she went on blithely. "I play the organ for the Sunday Preachings, and I have my own washing and mending to do. So I'm busy. As for having fun, we have that too in a quiet way. Mrs. McCoy says some quaint things—so does Crombie. The other night he was in to see Kerry, and Mrs. McCoy was telling him of some place she had been visiting where she declared one might eat off the floor! 'Eat off the floor!' says Crombie with a snort. 'Dod, you could eat off ours any day and get a good meal off it, too!' Poor Mrs. Abercrombie was terribly mortified—could not see any joke."

They laughed lightly, amused because she expected them to be amused. She changed the subject abruptly.

"What's going on at home, girls? How's the singing, Helen?"

"I sang last week," she answered dreamily, "sang at a revival of old music. My songs were

well received. When I had finished I saw that there were tears in the eyes of several persons."

"I don't doubt you," said Grace briskly—she was utterly without sentiment. "You will soon have the audience beginning to cry when they see you coming!"

Helen turned a scarlet and indignant face upon her tormenting sister.

"Grace!" she said in a strangled voice—for who likes to be brought so suddenly to earth? Laura interposed pacifically.

"Don't mind her, Helen. Don't you remember when she tried to learn the violin and the town council immediately brought in a by-law or whatever you call it, for the suppression of cats in the town limits? They couldn't stand her practising—reason why. I wonder why mother doesn't come up? She got back from down-town a little while ago, for I heard her come in."

"I'll run down and see," suggested Julia, glad of the excuse. She loved to roam about the old house, and put away for a little while her deep unhappiness. For she was lonely above all things, with a loneliness that closed her in like a wall—and her husband was on the outside of it.

She trod softly down the shabby old stairs in the glow of the afternoon sun. Spring was coming, with the beauty and glory of buds and flowers. Its promise was in the air, this day in late March. She drew a long breath and went into the little sitting-room, her mother's favorite room. And there, outstretched upon the floor, Mrs. West lay helpless, stricken down in the twinkling of an eye from cheerful activity to a

terrifying weakness.

"Mother!" cried Julia, aghast, running and kneeling beside her. One look at the face, slightly distorted, with foam upon the lips, told her that here was calamity indeed!

She ran back into the little hall, and called up the stairs in a voice that alarmed her sisters, while yet they knew of no cause for alarm.

"Oh girls! Come—come down quickly!"

Laura was first. Setting her hands on the banister, she balanced herself upon them and came down without touching a step. Julia was again stooping over her mother's prostrate form, and issued swift directions:

"Run for the doctor, Lollie—mother had fainted—" yet she knew it was no faint—"Helen, you and Grace must help me to get her to bed."

Laura heard no more. Hatless, coatless, she ran out in the chill of the late afternoon, with death at her heart. Her mother—her lifelong friend and comrade—with *that* look upon her face! Unconscious of staring eyes, she ran the length of the quiet street, and at the corner drug store she thought of the telephone. Crossing the icy roadway she ran full tilt into an elderly gentleman. He caught her by the arms and steadied her, while recognition flashed into his eyes.

"Why, bless me, what's this—what's this? You—running amok with the eyes of a ghost?"

"Oh, Uncle Gregory!" she gasped, quite out of breath as she clung to his substantial arm. "It's mother—Julia found her—lying on the floor—with her face twisted—so—Come

quickly—”

“I’ll go—yes. You run in there and call your brother-in-law—the doctor. Don’t worry about the little mother; we’ll fetch her round, please God!”

He hurried on, fingering his chins, of which he had two, and wishing he had a figure for sprinting. He let himself into the well-known hall, and followed the sound of voices to the sick room. By the time Laura returned he was able to assure her that the attack was slight, and would soon pass.

The older girls were told the whole truth. While their mother would recover and would probably go about again as usual, this was the beginning of the end for Mrs. West. Some day, sooner or later, the blow would fall, silently, suddenly and inevitably. They agreed that there was no need to tell “the child” these things. Sorrow would make a woman of her soon enough!

Therefore Laura’s holiday, though quiet, and somewhat anxious, was spared the forebodings and gloom that the great Shadow might have cast for her had she seen where it hung upon her horizon. She felt neither misgivings nor uneasiness in leaving her mother in Grace’s particular care, when at the end of the week, her duties called her to return to Andrews’ Bay.

Laura had left the Peninsula snowbound. She returned to find it softened by thaws. The train was amazingly on time, and as she walked uptown with her suitcase, she was surprised to see how the drifts had diminished, and how the whole appearance of the place had altered.

The water rushed headlong down the steep hills of the little town, guttering them deeply, dragging out gravel and washing over the sidewalks most destructively. It threatened cellars, and demolished culverts, mocking the efforts of a few men who strove with picks and shovels to divert it from these unlawful courses. The rotten ice of the bay, heaving under a south wind, showed symptoms of departure.

Laura saw no sign of the invaluable Crombie or her old acquaintance, John Hayes. Feeling just a little forlorn, she sought out the only livery stable in town and made known her requirements rather timidly.

The gentleman in charge of the establishment viewed her with large marble-like eyes which missed not a detail of her appearance. He spat out the end of a straw which he had been thoroughly Fletcherizing, and drew near to her, scratching his chin most horribly, and thrusting his face at her with each advancing step.

“Gosh!” he said with ingratiating restraint of language. “I couldn’t think to take y’ over there for a few days. The mail ain’t never got to Andrews’ Bay all week. The water has riz and took away the bridge at Potter’s Lake—and it’s twenty mile or more to go around by Dexter way.”

She shrank before his advancing stubbly chin, wishing there was a law to compel a man to shave himself before appearing in public. She loathed him and felt that walking would be preferable to driving with him. What she was to do, she did not know: a young girl and alone,

she disliked the publicity of a hotel—that must be the last resort.

The little restaurant where she had waited for John Hayes on the occasion of her first coming, was just across the street. With relief she betook herself thither, and ordered a lunch, for she had eaten nothing since leaving home in the morning. But before the woman had time to serve her, the shop door clashed open, and the young student entered eagerly. He advanced with outstretched hand.

"Ah, here you are! I have been looking all over town for you—missed meeting the train, for nobody ever expected it to be so early. How are you anyway? But no need to ask—you look—lovely!"

His voice dropped on the last word, uttered so earnestly that Laura flushed hotly. This was no idle compliment—he meant it. He seated himself opposite her, and she broke the embarrassing pause.

"Please do not speak to me in just that way, Mr. Hayes. I am glad to see you, but you must remember I am not accustomed to such wholesale flattery." She gave him a little smile to take the edge off her rebuke, but his mind had run on, ignoring her words as usual.

"Did O'Hagan tell you the bridges were down, and the roads flooded?" he enquired, and when she nodded, he said by way of explanation—

"He gets a small commission for every guest he sends to the hotels, and he sends a good many. I suppose he thought you would have to stay in town over Sunday anyway."

"And won't I?"

"Why, no. I'm going across now to the Bay. Finish your lunch and let us get away in daylight. Where are your satchels? Better let me have the checks—"

She surrendered them in silence, somewhat overwhelmed. She resented his masterful ways, yet found herself powerless to rebuff him. After all, he was very kind—she gave up the struggle.

CHAPTER VIII

A TREACHEROUS BRIDGE

SHORTLY before five o'clock they turned their backs to the little town and started westward. She had donned the invaluable dogskin coat without a murmur, having learned the penetrating qualities of the remorseless wind that scourges from lake to bay across the Peninsula. The week of thaw had greatly reduced the snow banks, and in many places water ran across the road or rushed, ditch-full, beside it. The slush in the track began to skim over with ice as the sun's power relaxed; sharp was the wind, and howling with a voice that suggested to the girl the ancient tale of the Heroic Serf who was eaten by wolves in far-off Russia.

Their vehicle was a high-wheeled attenuated sort of small democrat which held in the rear a varied assortment of groceries, a coal oil can securely corked with a potato; a new broom, a lantern and other items which Hayes had been commissioned to secure for his parishioners. Laura's suit cases were thrust under the seat, and helped to shelter her feet from the wind which was not only searching but unmistakably *finding*, as well.

Hayes made good time with his horse, and

they splashed along right merrily. The scattered houses had a new-washed look, for the snow had melted from roofs and window sills, and the bare ground showed here and there, black and muddy. She closed her eyes, thinking of the tall Easter lily in her mother's pleasant sitting room; hearing again in memory the mighty chorus:

“Christ the Lord is risen to-day.
Alleluia!”

“Tell me about your Easter service, she said, with a feeling of pity for the lives that knew so little brightness. He looked somewhat doubtfully at her.

“It was very quiet, as we had no organist. I have been hoping you would sing for us tomorrow. Will you?”

“Sing!” The idea was ridiculous. “I never sing in public!”

“A dozen people are not the ‘public,’ ” he said dryly. “You hear plenty of good music—these people hear none. They are not critics—they don’t know a chest note from a head note—but they will enjoy it if you sing something to them. They are not more formidable than Mrs. McCoy—and Kerry. You often sing to them, do you not?”

She was silent.

“It is for you to please yourself, of course,” he went on. “You can give them this pleasure if you will. If you prefer not to sing, there is no more to say about it.”

She was disturbed and annoyed. To sing in church—what an idea! Her pleasant little voice was never meant for such an ordeal, and she

rebelled against this duty which he thrust upon her. In spite of her conscious dislike of him and her anxiety to avoid him, she found herself drawn more and more under his control at every turn.

"I'll try it for once," she said somewhat ungraciously. "But please don't ask me again."

"Thank you," he rejoined with evident relief. "I am sure you will not regret it."

Nothing more was said for some time, while the horse picked his way warily among the stumps which showed threateningly through the rotting snow. Hayes looked anxiously to the west, where the sun was setting, a gorgeous red ball among banks of grey rose-tinged clouds. The remaining half hour of daylight would hardly suffice to take them across the bridge that crossed the lower end of Potter's Lake; and after dark he would not dare to risk it—with Laura.

He spoke briskly to his nag which responded with a cautious increase of speed. The dark pines and crowding cedars seemed to draw closer in the dusk and weave uncanny spells about them. A sense of fear seized the girl, a dread of the night, the road, and even of her strange companion. She shivered a little and huddled her numb hands under the robe.

"Cold?" he enquired, missing not the least of her actions.

"Only my hands," she said in a small voice. He snatched off his great fur gauntlets, and thrust them at her.

"Put these on," he commanded.

"No, no, you must not!" she cried and turned pleading eyes upon him. His own softened as he met that gaze—it meant more to him than she knew.

"Put them on," he repeated unbending. "I drove twenty miles this morning bare-handed. Put them on and don't be childish!" Again she felt hot, helpless resentment. He would not even let her have cold hands when she saw fit. What a nuisance he was!

His eyes were bent upon the road, and as usual, he had forgotten her words in his own absorption. They were advancing down a slope, and at the bottom lay the little inland lake, which had no known outlet. Across the southern marshy end a long wooden bridge extended. It was now three or four inches under water. He regarded it distrustfully.

"Let me go across first, Laura," he said, and she heard her name with distaste even in that emergency. "If it is safe for me, I will come back and get you."

"And if it isn't safe for you, I'll stand here all night and freeze as solid as Lot's wife!" she rejoined with a short laugh. "No indeed! Go to it—take a chance. I'm not afraid. Are you?"

He made no answer, but spoke to the horse which advanced uncertainly into the water, snorted and halted. Then Laura beheld the rare ancient miracle whereby a man infuses himself into the animal under his control, and makes it a willing part of himself. Hayes spoke low and encouragingly to the horse, imparting confi-

dence and daring. The bridge sank under their weight, but the horse advanced steadily. Laura had no sense of personal fear, although there came a sort of excited shivering, as she felt the unsteady timbers swaying and rolling. The water was well up on the animal's body, and she began to fear it would come into the democrat box.

"Steady, boy—that's the way!" she heard the student say. They were more than half way over—she began to breathe freely, but she could hear the whistling of his indrawn breath and feel the tense rigidity of his arm against her own. "Now, Doc, now for it—My God!"

The horse gave a few forward jumps and something seemed to collapse. There was a moment when it seemed that the little democrat would drop beneath the water, but the horse, heaving and snorting, dragged them to solid ground at the end of the bridge. The harness held faithfully—only the truant broom jolted overboard and locked itself among the dismembered timbers of the bridge.

"Whatever happened?" gasped Laura, white to the lips as she sensed something of the peril they had escaped. He drew his hand across his clammy brow.

"Council will have to build a new bridge here," he said with a shaky little laugh. "It is a good thing for us the old one was so substantial. . . . Come Doc, old boy—it is not far now."

They jolted up the slope in the gathering gloom, the horse whitening under their gaze as his wet, shaggy coat froze about him. A shrewd wind met

them at the hill top and beat upon them unmercifully. The girl, refusing to let her thoughts dwell on the danger they had just passed, was trying to peer through the shadows and locate the landmarks she had learned to know, when his voice reached her—

“Laura!”

She wished heartily that he would realize the liberty he was taking, yet felt that it was too small a matter to make a fuss about. Her tone was cold as she answered:

“Yes?”

“Will you forgive me for risking your life as I did on that treacherous bridge? When I think what might have happened—” he choked, and ceased abruptly.

“Oh, pshaw!” she said impatiently. “You did not risk my life any more than I risked yours. I was anxious to cross—and for once, I got my own way with you!”

“For once!” he cried, startled. “I want you to have your own way always!”

“Do you really?” her voice was low, and he thrilled responsively, leaning towards her with a light in his eyes.

“Oh, you know it!” he said with passion.

“Then take your old mitts and put them on!” she said unromantically as she slapped them down on his knee.

He chewed his lip in vexation, looking from her averted profile, palely indistinct in the growing darkness, to the distant lights which marked the end of the journey. She hummed comfortably to herself, ignoring him. The wheels rattled

and clashed; the steam from the horse's nostrils drifted back to them in the pauses of the wind. Presently they turned again at the old familiar lane and approached the house. He helped her from the high awkward vehicle as Mrs. McCoy came out with the lantern. There were cheery greetings, the pleasant light and warmth, and a world of welcome on Kerry's face.

She had so much to tell them, and the supper was so delightful, that she did not notice how the time passed until presently Hayes came in, silent and depressed, with the smoky lantern in his hand. It was characteristic of him that he always blackened it. Even of a lantern he demanded the impossible, and so defrauded himself of the value he might have had from it.

Her laughter and animation died away. She took her suit cases and departed to her room. All night she woke at frequent intervals to drink in the wonderful silence, and when morning shone across the room it found her sleeping contentedly, with her cheek on her arm. But Kerry puzzled through long hours of darkness; his keen eyes saw where the young student was fixing his hopes, and with a passion of helpless jealousy he wished Hayes at the bottom of the lake.

There is no better way to know people than by living in the house with them. Kerry had watched Laura under all circumstances and had found her to be candid, affectionate, generous. Out of her own glowing personality she had furnished his drab world with rainbow hues. His health had improved since she came, because he was happier, and because he had an absorbing interest in life.

He looked forward with eager longing to the time when, sound in body again, he might come to her free of his handicap. At the same time, as his restoration was somewhat uncertain, he dared not make any bid for her affections, lest he might perhaps bring sorrow in the future to that gentle heart. For suffering had taught him a wonderful consideration of others. He saw too that she was as yet unawakened, and determined to be to her the perfect comrade, if he might never be anything more. And yet he turned and tossed restlessly until out of the dark there came a firm determination—that no man, no obstacle of health, poverty, or adverse circumstance, should hold him from this girl who, he felt, was destined to be his.

Then he, too slept contentedly.

As for John Hayes, he put in a tremendous night. In his bare little upper bedroom he could hear the howl of the wind, the rattle of branches on the low roof, the scuttering of occasional mice in the walls; and his uneasy spirit fancied it heard Divine rebuke in every sound. The little lamp cast a dim unsteady light over the low wooden bed with its quilts of gay patchwork. He sat on the edge of the bed and drew from his pockets the notes of his sermon for the morrow. How paltry the words seemed—how childish and immature! A sick distaste filled his soul; he felt presumptuous—an ignorant lout who has aspired to the robes of an archbishop. And always, between his mind and the scared theme, came the vision of Laura to disturb his peace and fill him with dismay. Poor boy!

How was he to know it was as natural a state as the weariness that laid hold upon him? He felt it to be sin, and as sin it oppressed his soul. His head dropped into his hands, the notes fell unregarded to the floor, and he groaned miserably.

Next day Mrs. McCoy beheld his lamp with some concern. She had grown accustomed to the smoky chimneys, but this time the oil was gone completely! John Hayes never knew when the lamp burned itself out. He fought in an agony of remorseful prayer while the stolid alarm clock clicked its way through the hours, and at last, broken with weariness, he surrendered to sleep which caught him as he lay upon the tossed and tumbled bed.

He woke unrefreshed, splashed well in his little basin, distributing the water plentifully about the wall and floor, after which he carefully mopped it up with his little towel. Early as he was, Mrs. McCoy was earlier yet, and he found the kitchen fire roaring under great iron pots of water. She entered the kitchen from the outer door, just as he appeared at the foot of the stairs, and her perturbation was evident.

“Yon wee heifer—” she said briefly for all explanation, and seized a great steaming pot which she emptied into a pail. The door clashed behind her, as he tugged at his shanty socks. He followed as speedily as possible, and found her ministering, according to her limited experience, to the needs of a very sick beast. The labored breathing and marked distress of the animal told even him that here was serious trouble.

"Eh, dear—I'm thinking your time is short, poor wee thing," she said, and sighed, for here was a loss which would set back her hopes for Kerry in no small degree. "Wad ye rin awa' an' get Crombie to me?" she asked Hayes. "He's aye guid wi' beasts."

Hayes buttoned his coat about him, thrust his unmittened hands into the meagre pockets and went out to the stable. He started down the lane at a good pace, forgetting entirely his horse, which would have taken him in half the time.

Mrs. McCoy sank to her knees in the clean straw of an empty stall and drooped her head.

"O Lord," she prayed under her breath, "O Lord, consider the sufferings of this puir beastie and gie me wisdom in her behalf." She paused a little, for she knew very well it was a hundred times more for Kerry than for the sick heifer she prayed. She burst out passionately, "Oh Lord, consider my son, my only son, in his helplessness and need. Yet forgie me—Thou hast all power—what is a heifer more or less to Thee? Thou canst heal him without ony aid frae me. Do as Thou seest best wi' the beast, but oh, gie us faith in Thee and Thy goodness, which is mair to be desired than health or ony earthly gear!"

She rose from her knees and went back to the animal. It was quite dead, and utterly valueless except for the hide. Somewhat shaken, she went to the door and looked out blindly into the morning. The heifer had meant money to her—an increase in her little savings which would

help to hasten the day of Kerry's emancipation. Surely it was a righteous thing to desire this and labor for it—yet the Lord had destroyed the heifer. Why?

"God," she said calmly and with decent reverence, "Ye hae all power—ay, I counted on the heifer to help my lad, an' Ye hae ta'en the heifer. Noo I call upon Ye in a great and unshakable faith that will not be denied, that Ye shall put forth your wondrous power on my son, and heal him. I shall do my best, as I hae dune, but noo it is in Thy hands tae manage, and oh, Lord, gie us faith tae wait in patience until Thy guid time!"

Her lids drooped, and two great tears of relief stole from under them. As she stood so, with her folded arms on the lower half of the stable door, something fluttered past her, out to the light, and rested upon the upturned wheelbarrow. It was only a common barn pigeon, of white and radiant plumage, but to the mediaeval soul of Anne McCoy it was a Sign from Heaven.

From that moment she held no further doubt or uncertainty about Kerry's ultimate recovery. She knew. She told him, of course, the whole tale and managed to inspire him with some of her own tremendous faith and hope. He looked upon her with awe, feeling anew the reverent admiration which a good son ever accords to a good mother. It seemed to him that the Lord could not refuse her what she asked, for her sublime confidence and courage deserved success. And so, much heartened despite the loss of the

wee heifer, they dropped the subject with the calm which attends an inherent belief in the fore-ordination of life and its affairs. If he was to be cured, he would be eured in due time—so why worry? If their hopes were vain, at least they were harmless!

CHAPTER IX

“WHAT SHOULD WE KNOW OF LOVE?”

WHERE is Francie?”

Breakfast was over in the cheerful kitchen. The spring sunshine glowed in at the little windows and the icicles already dripped from roof and windowsill. Laura had seen nothing of the estimable chore-man since her return—hence her query.

“He’s no that weel—” responded Mrs. McCoy with charitable evasion. She knew very well that he lay in the wheat straw, with a couple of horse blankets over him and an empty quart bottle for explanation, at his feet with Jakie. It was a failing of his, and it led him where it had led many a better man—to poverty and ignominy. Some day he would lie down like a dog in the ditch and freeze to death—poor Francie. “Ay, he’s no that weel—he’ll be seein’ aboot his sel’ I’m thinking.”

The mild deception passed. Came a time of course, when Laura fathomed it, but she thought no less of Anne McCoy for seeking to hide Francie’s delinquencies.

He did not appear until the afternoon, when his wild eyes, ragged hair and shaking hands, aroused Laura’s ready sympathy. There was

that in his manner which held her aloof, however, and she wisely made no comment. She pitied his evident misery, but had she known the truth, she would only have despised him for a common drunkard. Francie always sobered up on buttermilk, the sourer the better, and I hesitate to state the extent of his raids upon the jug Mrs. McCoy kept in the woodshed for him on these occasions. He blamed his wretchedness always upon the inferior quality of the liquor, not upon himself for drinking it.

“Sich’n pison—” he groaned almost inaudibly as he sat in the corner with Jakie crouched at his feet. “Ow—I canna see ony richt in a law ‘at lets sich’n rubbish pass for guid whuskey. A man canna tak’ mair nor sax-seven guid drinks o’t afore he’s fair paralysed. Ech—dear—dear—”

Nobody paid any attention to him. Kerry declared that his mother must not miss church as Francie would look after him, and issued strict instructions to the unhappy man to comb his hair and wash his face, and make himself look decent. The two women departed with the student in his rickety chariot. Laura could not control a certain inward trembling as she remembered her promise to sing. All the way to the little school, and during the subdued greetings and grave handshakings with the waiting worshippers, she felt that sick apprehension at her heart. There was an unusually large congregation; my boy Benjy with a tall and stately sister, home from service in Toronto—the whole Abercrombie tribe—John Cowie, stern and silent—and a scattering of men and women with whom she was less acquainted.

Hayes opened the service, and proceeded quite as usual. He gave his brief vehement sermon—which Mrs. McCoy, during the morning, had heard and criticized. Then when Laura had begun to hope it had slipped his memory, he turned to her and nodded his signal. The little audience watched with interested approval while she settled the book in place and arranged the organ stops to her liking, and began singing to her own accompaniment that sweetly tender old song in which Mrs. McCoy had often coached her through the winter:

“I am far frae ma hame
And I’m weary aften whiles—”

She had a pleasant, flexible, untrained voice, full of sympathy, and altogether unaffected. It brought a response which might have failed a better artist, for when she closed her plaintive little effort there was an unaccustomed moisture to many an eye. Her own nervousness added a little pathetic tremble while she carried out her task, but as Hayes had predicted, she had no reason to regret the effort; the halting sincere appreciation of her hearers gave her a throb of the gladness that comes with the realization of honest service accepted.

John Cowie agreed to go down to Mrs. McCoy's house the next day and get the precious satchel which Laura had there for Mary. He was a big, good looking giant of a man, with great shoulders and a kingly head. Laura noticed grey streaks about his temples—worry over Mary, no doubt, she concluded as she stood watching Mrs. McCoy

talking to him. His immobile face betrayed nothing, but Laura sighed a little over the tragedy of these two whom she so admired.

"He thinks she doesn't love him, and so he is unhappy, and she thinks he has stopped loving her, and so her heart is breaking—people are so silly!" she thought to herself, and wondered what would be the end of it. Adjustment—or complete rupture—there was no middle path—nor could any alien hand help in the matter.

The days that followed brought her the old duties, familiar now, and very pleasant. The children were waking out of their all-enveloping shyness and showing an affection for herself and a desire for knowledge that greatly gratified her. Their basis of apperception (whatever that may be—it was her own word as she wrote to her mother) was very narrow. Since they could not see for themselves what the world was like, she endeavored earnestly to show them as much as possible. She read to them about famous men, great deeds, and wonderful sights, and encouraged them to read for themselves. She visited the home of every pupil, as she found that the parents considered this quite an honor—and the children were immensely delighted.

Do not imagine that she was a saccharine success everywhere she went. There were many to burden her with advice on the management of the school, and at times some bit of hurtful gossip came to her, to give her a lonely little heartache or even dampen her pillow with a few homesick tears. But in the main the world wagged very well. The ice had gone from the

bay, and the thunder of the water was like music to her. At noon she frequently left the school and ran down the close-shadowed road to the little Indian Clearance at the shore, where a great rock at the water's edge seemed to her like the throne of the world. Far out she saw the islands; the circling edge of the bay, tree-clothed, held the beating waters in their shallow home. She could not have analysed her pleasure, or told why this wild place appealed to her—why she loved the rocky shore, the restless bay, the cedars and the maples. Like a fairy gift it came to her and softly nestled to her heart. There were years to come when sorrow and unhappiness would find a sturdy antagonist in the memory of those innocent hours of delight.

So the days slid by until Saturday came, and as usual, she went to Mary Cowie's to give Dora her music lesson. Crombie had given his children Bible names, but Dora was really Pandora, which he declared to be as authentically from the same book as Adam might be—and no one contradicted him. Little Dora had cut her thumb, however, so the lesson was postponed.

"What do I owe you, Laura, for these things?" asked Mary, indicating the little articles Laura had assembled for her. She seemed very weary and languid.

"Dear heart—you don't owe me anything—you gave me money to buy the goods—surely you don't grudge me the pleasure of making them?"

"Why did you want to do that—was it really a pleasure?"

"Well," said Laura honestly, "I like working

with such things—and then I liked to do it for you—and John!"

"John—what makes you so considerate of him?" asked his wife sharply, while a frown drew her brows together. Laura hesitated a moment, then—

"I am sorry for John," she said gently. "He is very unhappy."

"Unhappy!" Mary's laugh was not pleasant to hear. "I assure you, Laura, he eats his meals and sleeps as soundly as ever he did—unhappy! Why he doesn't know how to be unhappy—he lives in a sort of bovine calm, where nothing disturbs him!"

"A little bovine calm wouldn't hurt you, just at present," returned the girl equably. "It is none of my affair, you know, Mary, if you like to lead him the life of a dog, but I hate to see you do it." She paused with a quizzical look on her face, and presently Mary burst forth—

"Why do you look at me like that? Talk to me—ask me what you will—for God knows my brain reels with this unhappy muddle—I have thought of it and thought of it for long hours day and night and I'm desperate!"

Laura took her hands and stroked them gently.

"Tell me, then—is he honest?"

"Oh, yes—he is a Cowie!" There was a faint pride in the answer.

"Is he fairly kind to you—generous—lenient?"

"Yes—I suppose so—" she admitted it reluctantly.

"And he is clean and decent in his habits?"

"Why—of course!"

"Has he a certain amount of—well, intelligence—brain, you know?"

"He is clever, Laura, and has taught himself a great deal."

"Do you think you ever loved him, dear?"

Mary laid her head against Laura for a minute, then answered in a choked voice—

"I loved him once—but oh, I was appalled when I came to this lonely wilderness and saw the things that were expected of me as his wife. Somehow I had not dreamed of feeding calves, and cleaning fish, and—and all the horrid, disgusting things here on a farm! I couldn't do them—and I suppose he saw how I felt. He seemed to draw away. I'm out of my native environment—at a loss. He is at home, and I have always felt my disadvantage—It seems as if I must include him in my distaste for his surroundings."

"Well," said Laura, holding firmly to the main issue, "You loved him once—don't you love him now? You can't say 'no' to that, can you? And I believe he is just hungry for you!"

But Mary only answered miserably—

"I don't think so. Let us forget it anyway. Play me some of the new songs, and we'll give John a rest."

So the subject was dropped, but Mary did not easily do away with the idea that Laura had implanted. She began to wonder whether she still loved her husband—and so certain had she been that her love was dead, it was well-nigh impossible to believe it still lived. She watched him closely, searching for signs of an affection

which had once been very evident, but as she never probed the ashes, she failed to find the living coals. He had himself well in hand, so well that she read death where there was only restraint and lashed herself with scorn of the wild hopes that had sprung up in her weary heart.

Laura stayed late that day. It was sunset when she came to the Indian Clearance, and the red sun was royal among the purple and fine linen clouds. She clambered up on the great rock to watch him dip into the lake. The long shadows lay upon the still water. The day had been unseasonably warm, and thunder clouds rolled up along the sky. She sat musing, with wide eyes fixed upon the scene, while her mind dwelt with Mary and her husband. No doubt it would all come right in time—but how unhappy they were making themselves meanwhile! Mary had made a poor start, marrying without either the knowledge or consent of her parents, and she must pay for her headstrong impulse.

Laura, watching the changing water and the mighty clouds, presently forgot all about her friends. It was a wild and beautiful scene, one of which she never wearied. The red glow of the dying day “lingered low adown,” and it was not until a terrific flash of lightning warned her of the coming storm, that she looked inland—and saw that night had come! In panic she scrambled from the rock, and groped through the shadows over logs and stones towards the road. Among the trees it was quite dark, for the storm had covered the sky, and now blotted out the last gleams of sunset. She dared not hurry, for the

narrow corduroy road was bordered on either side by treacherous swamp. Testing every step before she let her weight move from one foot to the other, she advanced cautiously, warned by the balsams that tapped her face when she came too close to the edge of the causeway.

Farther and farther she went, the night darkening about her, until a panic took hold of her. If she could only run, and get out of this smothering tunnel of trees! Surely she was near the end of that close-crowded bit of swamp! She halted, trying to pierce the gloom with narrowed eyes—and in the silence she distinctly heard the padding of invisible feet upon the road in front of her.

Her skin prickled with a very primitive terror, and dampness beaded the roots of her hair. Her heart leaped to her throat and strangled the scream her stiff lips strove to utter. The horror of darkness and the unknown filled her—for Something frightful was within a few feet of her, *waiting!* Just as it seemed that she had plumbed the very depths of physical fear, there came another awful flash of lightning, fairly blinding her—but not before it had showed her a dark shape in front of her, and two glaring eyes! Her shriek was drowned in the roar of the thunder; she turned to fly, but the Unknown was upon her, and seized her by the shoulders. Her flesh recoiled from that touch, with nauseating revulsion, even as the voice spoke and told her who it was.

“Laura!” John Hayes was almost as excited as she was; but her resentment surged up, master-

ing all other emotions. She wrenched free of his hands, trembling desperately in the reaction from her suspense and terror.

"Don't—don't you touch me—or call me 'Laura!' Oh, go away—how you frightened me!"

"Don't waste time talking," he advised, sensibly, taking hold of her firmly by the arm. "The storm will be on us in a moment. Run, Laura!"

Heavy spatters of rain dashed in their faces, as he drew her, stumbling, along the rough road, while the lightning, which was now almost incessant, gave them light enough for their safety. Panting, breathless, they reached the school, and dashed into the little low shed for shelter. The furious storm swept in after them, driving the rain in torrents across the floor so that Laura crept up on the pile of chunks and sat there, flushed and almost exhausted from that mad race in the darkness.

Here was a nice state of affairs, truly! The storm might last half the night, and she would have to spend the time listening to this erratic, exasperating young man. What in the world could she talk about, that would give safe and suitable meeting ground? Hayes had such a way of over-riding her wishes, and imposing his own upon her, ignoring what she said and following imperturbably his own train of thought, that she dreaded to hear what he might say. She had not long to wait. Into her whirling thoughts, his voice broke, calm and assured—

"You did not get wet, I hope, Laura?"

"Miss West, please," she said coldly.

"Why—what harm in calling you 'Laura'?"

"None—except that I prefer you to be more formal."

"But you let Kerry call you that," he said with jealousy.

"Did he tell you so?" Her eyes narrowed and her brows drew to a line. Oh, the rash young man!

"No—of course not," he answered sulkily. "Francie told me."

"Oh—Francie! I might have known— How delightful to have you discuss me, with Francie!"

"I don't discuss you with Francie, and you know it!" he flung out desperately. "He—he—"

"Oh yes, 'he—he'—isn't here to tell his side of it," she mocked, thoroughly out of patience with him. "Well," she went on, with candid brusqueness, "I've had sufficient of your conversation. Be good enough to favor me now with a large amount of that golden silence one sometimes reads about."

He was at her side before she realized it, and through the pounding of the wind and rain, his voice came, low and urgent:

"Don't—don't speak so! I love you, Laura—I must tell you!"

He tried to take her in his arms, but her sudden recoil sent an avalanche of maple chunks down upon him, and slightly interfered with his love making.

"You are a—a low cad!" she gasped, white with anger. "Love! You don't know what love is—and never will! I don't want your love, and I won't hear of it. It's ridiculous, and dis-

gusting. I hate the very touch of your fingers—”

“Why? I’m not an evil man!” he protested, thunder-struck at the violence of her repulse.

“Evil man—dear me—who told you there were such creatures? No, you are not ‘evil’—you might be more interesting if you really were!” she retorted, lighting upon a surprising truth. “I think you are a man of very small vision. . . . I feel rather sorry for you indeed; you are so taken up with John Hayes and his affairs that the rest of the universe is crowded out of your landscape!”

“You would never think of that, if you cared,” he said, passionately, so hurt that his voice trembled.

“Well,” she answered with more calmness, “I don’t care, and ’don’t want to care, for your personality does not appeal to me.”

“But if you would only learn to love me, you could make me anything you wished!”

She shook her head emphatically, though in the darkness he could not see that, of course.

“That’s nonsense. ‘Learn to love you’—why should I? *I don’t want to!* If, after to-night, I ever learn to tolerate you, it will be more than you deserve. If you bother me again with such talk, I’ll either change my boarding place, or give up the school altogether.”

“Laura—Laura!” he groaned miserably. “But I do love you!”

He laid his hot head against her knee as she sat slightly above him in the darkness, and even the instinctive shudder of her limbs failed to show him the depth of her dislike.

"Lift your head, John Hayes," she said with authority—and he lifted it. "Now listen to me. You are not playing the man. This is a distinctly childish exhibition, and even a child has sense enough to know when its desires are definitely and reasonably refused. Now if you have anything more to say, say it, while I am powerless to hinder you; for I declare that I'll never willingly change a word with you after to-night."

He sat dumbly, seeking words which would not come. The fury of the storm was abating, and with its close his opportunity would vanish.

"And all my fault," he whispered helplessly, "has been in loving you!"

"Not at all!" she retorted. "Your fault lay in mentioning it. We know nothing of life—what should we know of love? And I'm sure anybody with sense would see that we are utterly unsuited to each other."

She went to the entrance and looked out. The rain was nearly over, and the wind was thrusting away the broken clouds. Her eyes, accustomed now to the darkness, discerned the dim path. She started out.

He followed her at once, and they walked the long mile in silence. They entered the orchard and passed along the path below the dripping apple trees. At the verandah he paused to fire his last shot with a certain venom.

"I know I have Kerry to thank for what you have said to me. Pity is akin to love, they say—and you cannot help but pity him!"

"Oh, you little, *little* man!" she said with contempt. "Some day I hope Kerry will crush

you like a fly against the wall—just for that!"

And Kerry was very glad that his mother had opened his bedroom window, for he enjoyed the way she said it. With his big hands locked together in the darkness he measured the strength that was coming to him by degrees again.

"If I had that little, little man across my knee now, I think I could break him in two!" he told himself, with a satisfaction that was altogether youthful and natural.

He slept very well, that night.

CHAPTER X

THE EVICTION OF FRANCIE

JOHN HAYES was a poor loser. He walked the wet orchard for two hours after Laura left him, tormenting himself, and finally came to the conclusion that as his love for Laura had taken his mind from his ministerial work, it was therefore a sinful love, and the Lord had accordingly denied him his desire. The fact that he could not accept the situation resignedly was to him a sign that the Evil One held sway in his heart. He felt that until he had conquered himself and his sinful soul, he was not fitted to guide others.

Late as it was, he sought out Mrs. McCoy, and to her kindly maternal heart he appealed for sympathy. She closed Kerry's door tightly for once, as this matter was private, and silently listened to the excited young man.

"Poor lad! Poor lad!" she said gently. "But ye ken, ye're verra young—are ye no?"

"I'm older than Kerry," he shot back jealously, and her face hardened slightly.

"We micht leave Kerry oot o' it. He isna marryin' or makkin' love. Hoch, sirs, I wad learn him to be at sich'n foolery!" She smacked

her hands most suggestively together. "What is't ye want o' me?"

"I have thought it all over," he said wearily, "and I see how weak and unworthy I am. I feel that I have lost Laura, and I have lost my soul—"

"My certes!" she ejaculated, "and which seems like the worst loss?" Then ashamed of herself, she added in a different tone, "Dinna speak o' lossing yer soul, lad. The Lord has it in chairge, an' He will na loss it that easy. By times we all feel unco sinful, an' unworthy o' the Lord's wark. It's no in oor ain stren'th we'll conquer, but aye by pittin oor faith in Him. Ye are sore doon-casted the now, and inclined to gie the Evil One credit for ower muckle power. Could ye no sleep on it?"

"No, no!" he answered with that intensity which always fired him. "I shall not sleep until I have this thing settled. How can I go on with my present work, knowing the wickedness of my heart and the weakness of my will? I'm afraid I must give it up, and look to the salvation of my own soul before I attempt to help others."

"Soul—soul! Aye dingin' aboot yer ain wee soul! Ye sud think shame to be makkin' sich'n uproar aboot yon—ye hae petted it and pampered it until it is as weak as water—and as useless as a fiddle at a funeral! Pit it oot o' yer mind—haste ye to the wark ye hae trained yersel' for—strive for the souls o' others and dinna make a blether aboot yer ain! This is but a test to try ye if ye be a man. What if yer lass

says ‘No’—daur ye gie that to the Lord as an excuse for casting doon the task He laid upo’ ye?”

He rose to his feet, very white, and with a trembling about the lips that was touchingly boyish. Her words had stung him keenly. For a moment he struggled with himself, and then making a great effort he said—

“Thank you, Mrs. McCoy, and—good night!”

With some astonishment she saw him cross to the stairway, and stumble from the room. He was a constant puzzle to her, as indeed he was to himself. He longed so for affection—yet had the unhappy faculty of creating only indifference or resentment in the hearts of those whom he most admired. A pathetic figure of a youngster surely, in his discouragement and loneliness.

“Weel,” said Anne McCoy to herself with a pitying sigh— “he tak’s it awfu’ hard—awfu’ hard. But the lass had sense for baith o’ them. He hasna his profession in hands yet—an’ when he dis, ’tis a hert-breaking business—ministerin’. His wife’ll aye be sittin’ on his coaties tae haud him doon when he’s ower anxious—or skivin’ him wi’ her elbow to rise him when he’s hingin’ back, for he’s that uncertain he disna ken whether he’s comin’ or gangin’ half the time.”

She closed up the stove, fastened the kitchen door and put out the lamp, thinking of this thing in connection with Kerry. She wondered if she had been mistaken in the depth of his interest in Laura. It was futile to say they were children, and so dismiss the topic. There can be no fine line of distinction drawn between the

bud and the flower—a little rain or sun may hasten the development. Kerry had the years of a man—and no doubt he had the heart and desires of one. She found herself, in spite of a genuine liking for Laura, wishing that she had been of the type of the vanished Miss Brewster—for then Kerry would still be all her own. Her common sense told her, of course, that it was well for all concerned that his hopes had centred upon a girl of Laura's character and disposition. But what if Laura should give him the answer she had given John Hayes?

She sat, pondering in the darkness on the edge of her bed, having taken off her shoes. The blind was up, the curtains drawn back, and a faint moon peered in over the ragged clouds. A slight sound roused her from her reverie—a sound that could be nothing else than the creaking of the stairs. She rose, all curiosity, and in her stocking feet moved softly to the bedroom door which was slightly open.

Very dimly she saw some one emerge from the stairway in the darkness. It must be John Hayes, for no one else was sleeping upstairs, Francie being away on one of his little jaunts. He moved stealthily to the table and laid something upon it. Then he turned to the door.

“Are ye no weel?” she asked him calmly striking a match on the back of her bedroom door and proceeding to relight the lamp.

“Not—not very!” he stammered, so startled that he dropped his boots to the floor with considerable clatter, while his eyes roamed wildly, avoiding hers.

She came over to him as he stood uncertainly, and fixed him with her steady gaze.

"Sit doon!" she motioned him to a chair, but he shook his head in negative while his lips moved inarticulately.

"Sit doon!" she repeated with emphasis.
And he sat down.

"I want ye to do me a wee favor," she said smoothly and waited for his acquiescence.

"What say ye? I must hae yer promise."

"Very well," he said sulkily, "I'll do my best."

"Sit there, then, till I get what I want ye to tak'," she ordered, and went into the pantry. She had not missed the letter he had laid on the table—the proverbial letter without which no deserving person would think of disappearing. Presently she came forth with a tea cup in which lay a very respectable spoonful of glistening white crystals. She handed him his letter from the table.

"Int' the stove wi't. We want no sich'n trash aboot—" she instructed him briefly and went to the water pail, where she half filled the cup, stirring briskly to dissolve the medicine. Then she brought it to him.

"Pit that inta ye. Yer bluid is ower hot, an' wants coolin'. Doon wi't or, my fegs, I'll haud yer nose like a bairn, an' mak' ye tak' it!" She towered threateningly over him, and he surrendered, gulping down the bitter dose. She took his boots from him and put them inside her own bedroom door.

"Ta bed the noo, an' if ye canna sleep yersel' ye micht be kind eneuch tae let ither hae a wee

bit rest. Nae mair o' yer whimsies—an' dinna think tae creep frae ma hoose like a thief in the nicht! Ye want skelpin', my lad, and ye're in a fair way to get it, gin ye canna show mair sense!"

She watched him to the stairway once more, and then with a sigh of mingled relief and exasperation went to bed herself. If he still had a mind to do anything desperate he was quite welcome to do it. She was weary of him and his ways. The responsibility of dealing with such a character was heavy upon her shoulders.

In the morning, however, a great calm seemed to have settled upon the household. Laura was her bright, cheery self again, and except that she gave neither word nor look to Hayes, her manner was the same as usual. There was a sort of suppressed exultation about Kerry. The sentences that had floated in to him the previous night were unreasonably exhilarating, and caused him keen delight. Some day, he knew, Laura would tell him the whole story—until then he could wait. Hayes was a little quieter than usual, and seemed tired. So was Mrs. McCoy, upon whom fell the burden of all these antics. He did not offer to read her his sermon, for which she was very glad. Directly after dinner, Laura, dressed for church, made her escape from the house. He did not try to follow her.

She had a good hour to spare and strolled happily along to the Clearance. The grass was wet from the storm of the night and she picked her way carefully to the great rock. The never-failing delight of the changeful bay took hold

upon her—always different, yet always the same! Winter had gone, and spring with its ever-welcome promise of life and beauty was at hand. Soon the dark and silent bush would overflow with birds and blossoms in a prodigality astonishing to her town-bred eyes.

Presently it was church time. She went back to the little dingy school-room to her duties as organist for the service. Hayes fastened his wistful gaze upon her in the faint hope of discovering some relaxation of her attitude—but there was none. His day's work was done, as far as she was concerned.

Mrs. McCoy had not come to the service, which meant that the erring Francie must have secured a larger bottle than usual. He would keep quite sober for months, and then “go on a good old toot,” as Crombie phrased it. The main “toot” was of a most hilarious and joyful character, and he recovered from it by means of a descending series of “toots,” growing fine by degrees and beautifully less until he once more regained his normal saturnine equilibrium.

As Laura approached the house upon her return she heard a dolorous sound, at times faintly droning, then swelling into a clamorous uproar of dissonant noises and minor turns. She halted to listen—it was a song! Presently she distinguished words, and discovered that there was a weird bag-pipe sort of tune to the thing. It unburdened itself in a raucous voice grating harshly upon the ear:

“Oh, whaur hae ye been to, Lord Randall,
my son?

Oh, whaur hae ye been to, my handsome young mon?"

"A-huntin' and fishin'—mither mak' my bed suné

For I'm weary, weary wanderin', an' the pain won't lay doon!"

She found out later that there were some seventeen verses of this ditty, but for the present the singer contented himself with going over the first verse a few times. She went into the house. Francie sat in the rocking chair by the stove, and Kerry, very white and tired, lay among the cushions of the lounge. Jakie crouched as usual at Francie's feet. The man, though heavy with drink, held his peace when she entered, and was sottishly aware of her swift recoil as she realized with disgust that he was drunk.

"Where is your mother?" she said to Kerry quickly, for this was a case for the older woman to handle.

"She went over to Mrs. Wilbury's half an hour ago," he answered wearily.

Laura turned to the object in the rocking chair with an imperious gesture. "Come," she said briefly, opening the door of the kitchen, "to the stable with you—and Jakie."

"Hech—but ye're a bonny wee lassie!" he leered at her, "but I'm no gaun to the stable the noo!"

She advanced with fiery determination in her eye, and made a sudden swoop upon the unsuspecting Jakie. The loose skin on his back and neck gave splendid hold as she cast him forth yowling from the door, and I have even a sus-

picion that she kicked him as he went. Then she returned to Francie who had viewed the proceedings with alarm. He rose unsteadily as she bore down upon him, and made his way with cautious despatch to the open door.

"Gosh, now," he muttered in amaze, "Ye wadna think it—ye wadna think it to luik at her! Dinna pit a hand tae me, lass. I'm awa—"

She had no intention of putting a hand to him, but closed the door firmly upon the outcast and ran back anxiously to Kerry.

"Did he hurt you—oh, Kerry—did he hurt you?" She snatched off her gloves—I don't know that she would have touched Jakie barehanded—and bent above the boy. She laid her cool, smooth hand upon his brow, wondering if he had fainted, for his eyes were closed and he was exceedingly pale. The hot color surged up at her gentle touch, and his eyes opened reassuringly. He felt a wild desire to brush his lips against the small palm, but would not so requite her generous impulse.

"I'm all right, thank you," he said with some restraint—"the smell of liquor always turns me sick—and Francie's singing is appalling at any time! But Francie wouldn't hurt me—he will be terribly sorry when he comes to himself."

Laura, feeling a little self-conscious, walked over to the table and lifted her gloves, which she eyed with some disfavor.

"I'll go and take off my hat," she said, "and probably your mother will be home before long."

When she returned to the kitchen Mrs. McCoy was there with an exciting tale of the Wilbury

baby and its particular variety of convulsion. She had news for Laura, moreover. The Inspector was abroad, and might call on her at any time. He walked from one school to the other through the Peninsula and was as certain a sign of spring as the proverbial robin.

As long as our school system works as it does there will be inspectors, no doubt, and there will be young teachers to tremble at the thought of a visit from them. All through the ensuing week Laura felt the portentious shadow over her and strove valiantly with her flock, bringing them to a state which shamed perfection. But he did not come.

The following week came three new pupils, who disorganized her time table by necessitating a new class, and while she was struggling with this problem, doom came upon her.

He was a short, thick-set elderly man with a very large nose and very small eyes. His mouth, to quote Crombie, was like a crack in a board, and he knew his business down to a hair. He sported an immense and baggy umbrella, wore great rubbers and a dingy overcoat. He opened the school-room door and entered unannounced. Not a head turned. "Oh, they *did* remember what I told them!" thought Laura, much relieved that his surprise entry failed of results.

She brought him to the front of the room, to a chair especially provided for visitors.

"Children—Inspector Gray!" she said, and they responded beautifully, rising at their desks and bowing ceremoniously in the direction of the great man.

"Very good, very good!" he acknowledged graciously. "Now, young lady, Miss—er—West, yes, just go ahead, yes. Never mind me!"

There are two nightmares that haunt school-teachers; one is in the form of the class that gets beyond control, and one is in the guise of the Inspector who tells them to go ahead as if he were not there. For a few seconds Laura saw stars. She could feel the moisture starting out at the roots of her hair, and had a horrid fear that the central part of her anatomy was missing altogether. Then she gathered up her old time table with its ruled lines and neat arrangement, and handed it to him with the new and mangled form which she was trying to work out.

"I'm fitting in three new pupils," she informed him, and then undertook to forget him altogether. He roamed about while she went through her routine, and he looked at the floor for dust and scraps of paper. He scanned the desks for knife marks and ink-splotches, and scared Benaiah Abercrombie out of his little senses by demanding to look into his desk and see what sort of housekeeping he observed!

What a morning it was! Laura positively trembled with nervousness as she dismissed her little flock for recess. She knew that the fiery furnace was mild to the ordeal Mr. Gray had in store for them after it, and she was not mistaken. Between eleven and twelve o'clock he gave those youngsters such a drilling and a grilling as she had never contemplated. He tried them with mental arithmetic and spelling, with reading and geography, until Laura's heart was in her

boots and ready to go lower at the first opportunity.

She was more than thankful to see the hands of the clock arrive at the hour of twelve.

"Do you not go to your boarding-house for your dinner?" he asked her with curiosity.

"No," she replied—"it is rather far, and besides, the children have to stay here, so I stay too."

"Ah, yes, I see," he said, apparently much gratified, "You stay too. Well now, young lady, Miss—er—West, yes. I want you to push these children along. Keep right after them, and don't let them lag. See that they have plenty of home work, and drive them—drive them!"

"Oh, Mr. Gray!" she expostulated with reason, "they walk from a mile to three miles morning and evening, carrying books and lunches, and they all help at home a certain amount. They are good, honest little workers—it would be cruel to push them so! I know the school is behind the schedule, for it was closed last fall, but they will catch up gradually."

He eyed her attentively and nodded acquiescence. "Very well. Use your discretion." He bent his big nose to one side in a way that was characteristic of him. Not a detail of her appearance, the condition of the room or the method of conducting the school had escaped him; yet he gave her no word of either encouragement or disapproval, but rearranged his little papers in his satchel, gathered up his belongings and departed.

In a most impartial report to the trustees, he

stated that the school had made a percent well up in the nineties, and recommended the trustees to secure Laura's services for another year, as she might improve. She interpreted this to mean that she might be induced to force the children along more determinedly, but sighed as she remembered her promise to her mother that she would not ask to stay after the year was done.

CHAPTER XI

AN AMATEUR BUTTER MAKER

UPON the following Saturday morning, Laura enveloped herself in a very large apron and drew a neat white cap over her dark hair. It was churning day, and she proposed to learn the niceties of butter making. With Mrs. McCoy she sniffed and stirred at the crock of cream standing on a chair at the back of the stove. Her hands trembled with excitement as she measured the drops of butter-coloring, and added the necessary pinch of baking soda to the thick, heavy fluid. Finally she scalded the churn, let off the water and poured in the cream, all under careful supervision. As she screwed down the lid there came a hasty knock upon the door. It was John Cowie.

"I'm away for the doctor," he said briefly to Mrs. McCoy. "Will you go to her?"

She nodded assent, and he was gone immediately, to cover many rough miles before he could possibly return with the man of medicine. She went to her bedroom and presently reappeared with a small satchel which had been ready packed for weeks.

"Lat the churnin' be t' I come hame," she said to Laura. Then to Kerry, "Ye'll no mind, lad?"

"I'll be all right, mother," he assured her.

"I'm in good hands, you know. Goodbye."

"Aweel, see an' behave yersel'," she advised with a twinkle. "Miss West'll hae to slap yer hands gin ye meddle whaur ye shouldna. Goodbye."

She went out briskly and shut the door. From the window Laura watched with admiration the firm, erect figure striding down the orchard path. Then she came back to her churning.

"It just has to be whirled around and around, now, doesn't it?" she asked, taking hold of the handle.

"That's all," he answered, and she accordingly began to revolve the barrel vigorously. Now the heat and the soda and the motion combine with the acid of the cream to produce a volcanically eruptive state, which the seasoned butter maker relieves by withdrawing the plug from the bung hole, so that the gas may escape. Laura, unschooled in this matter, had no thought of any such expedient, and whirled away manfully until she had arrived at a great speed, when, Bang! Out flew the plug very forcibly and struck the opposite wall just in front of a foaming geyser of cream!

Laura dropped the handle and snatched at the spinning barrel, bruising herself recklessly as she strove to halt its course. In blank consternation she stood holding it as her eyes measured the extent of the catastrophe.

"What have I done! Oh, Kerry, just look at it!" she exclaimed in absolute dismay. But Kerry chuckled, quite unperturbed.

"Rest the barrel on a chair, and then put the plug in again," he said laughing at her amaze-

ment and distress. "Cheer up—no harm is done. You have only had the usual experience of butter makers in their first effort."

"But what ever made it do that?" she said ruefully surveying the damage, which indeed, appeared to be somewhat extensive.

"Well, you see," he explained, "it's the gas—even the hot water in the churn makes a steam which must be let off. It's the fermentation, or something—gas anyway. I should have thought of it, and warned you, but I didn't, so how could you be expected to think of such a thing? But you must not mind—there really is not as much cream abroad as you might think."

"I'm sorry to waste it for your mother," she answered, troubled in mind, for she knew how carefully the widow hoarded for Kerry. There was nothing to do of course, but to clean up the cream. Her hands, unused to such toil, made long work of it, and when she had finished wiping the wall and ceiling she could not feel particularly satisfied with their still greasy appearance. With the floor there was no great difficulty, but by the time she went back to the churn again, it had grown cold and the remaining cream had also lost its temperature. She threshed away at it determinedly without avail, while Kerry lay back in his big chair, and watched her, musing.

His thoughts were very pleasant, yet he sighed withal, and turned his gaze out of the window frequently, with the firm resolve to be sensible, and to hold his desires away from the impossible. A man is foolish to torture himself with longing

for that which can never be his. But his eyes strayed invariably to the earnest, busy figure of the girl as she twisted away at the stubborn old churn. How absorbed she was—how utterly unconscious of herself! He wondered whether all her thoughts were given to the task in hand, or did she perhaps let herself remember that he was in the room, happy in watching her.

So intent and piercing was his regard as he revolved these ideas, that Laura, meeting his gaze, colored with slight embarrassment.

"What's the matter with this cream, Kerry? How long does your mother usually work it to get butter?" she asked, pausing for her breath.

"About twenty minutes or so, I think," he answered, coming out of his reverie. "Likely it is cold. Better let it wait until she comes home."

"Couldn't I warm it? It seems so helpless to sit and look at it and not be able to do a thing with it. She may be late getting back, and have no chance at it until Monday."

"That is so," he agreed in a low tone. He had felt the sting of helplessness very often, very keenly.

His tone touched her, and she shot him a quick look of understanding, but made no comment.

"I think you had really better leave it," he went on. "I know she does warm it with hot water sometimes, but that is a ticklish business—might make the butter soft."

"Well, then, I'll churn awhile longer," said Laura with determination. "I hate to be a quitter—and maybe I can get butter."

Presently to her alarm there came a loose splashing in the barrel, followed by a solid bump, bump! The little glass on the lid lost its thick coating of cream, and showed itself first splotched, then quite clear.

"What's wrong now! Oh, what have I done?" she cried with agitation, remembering her former mishap.

"Butter—you've got the butter!" laughed Kerry.

"Oh, have I really! And what must I do?"

"Rock it a little to gather it into something of a mass—then draw out the plug and let the buttermilk away into a pail," he advised, rather proud of his knowledge on this homely theme. She did as he instructed her, and presently had the great pleasure of drinking buttermilk which owed its presence to the persuasion of her own capable hands. . . . Never had anything tasted better!

Then awkwardly she washed the fine yellow grains, and cast in the salt Mrs. McCoy had left. She worked the mass until her wrists and shoulders ached, and finally printed it with the round old-fashioned print which bore a pattern of acorns enclosed by a border of oak leaves.

"Oh, Kerry, isn't it pretty—isn't it pretty!" she exclaimed in triumph.

And Kerry, looking, not at the butter, but at her, agreed that it was.

About this stage in the proceedings, Francie entered dourly, in search of dinner, which Laura had quite forgotten. He had avoided her most sincerely since the passage of arms on the previous Sunday, and would not now have entered

the house had he known that Mrs. McCoy was away. She put the butter down cellar and set aside the bowl with the print and ladle until she could have time to wash them. It was something of a responsibility to administer the affairs of this house, especially as she knew but little of domestic matters anyway.

Presently, however, she arranged the dinner upon the table, and the three had their meal. Francie scorned to ask for anything, but when it was beyond his reach he simply rose in his place and stretched for it with his fork. In this way he speared slices of bread and long dripping mustard pickles, or drew to himself the butter dish and potato bowl. Laura knew that her mother would have been horrified and disgusted at such table manners. She herself felt quite unequal to the strain of eating from a dish wherein Francie's fork had been dabbling. Mrs. McCoy insisted upon a rigid observance of butter-knife proprieties, and reprimanded Francie sharply when he failed to come up to the requirements. But alas! she was away, and Francie ate his dinner unadmonished.

Laura washed the dishes and butter utensils and swept the floor, feeling quite house-wifelike at the work. Kerry watched her with eyes that had never seen any picture half so charming. Her serious face, flushed by the excitement of new and delightful tasks, was intent upon the accomplishing of these dear domestic duties. Then he said:

"Francie will stay with me now, for I know you want to go for your mail. I'll be all right while you are away."

So she went down the orchard path among the naked trees, over the shabby brown earth that would in a few weeks bloom in fragrance and verdure. The sun shone gaily in a sky of boundless blue; the frost was gone from the air and everything seemed ready for the miracle of renewed life and vigor. The cattle in the stable yard bawled restlessly, nosing in the corners for the slow grass. They saw no poetry in the landscape, but they sniffed the spring in the air, and it made them uneasy. The gaunt stump fences stood up bleakly in the landscape, showing by their mighty spread and twisted roots the giant size of the trees they had once upheld. There was something pathetic about this country —its history was all in the past—a history of stirring times woven about the mighty vanished patriarchs of the forest. As the trees went, so went the people who lived by them, some to other timber regions, some to the wide prairies to found new homes and new industries—and some went to that narrow bed from which there is no return.

She knew herself to be delightfully alone, and in the spring time freedom she lifted up her voice and sang:

“Down the orchard path to me
Comes Mollie—singing!
Voice of April ecstasy,
Singing—singing!
Eyes of blue to match her gown,
Hair that brings the sunlight down,
Smile that aye forbids the frown:
My Mollie, singing!”

Her voice thrilled gaily out upon the quiet air, and a crow, much interested, paused upon a little sap pine to view the phenomenon. She saluted him gaily. "Well, old chap, how does it sound?"

"Bit of Heaven she is for me,
My Mollie singing!
Voice that bids the shadows flee,
Singing—singing!
Face of hope to meet the day,
Heart that chases gloom away,
Joy be ever yours, I pray,
My Mollie, singing!"

He flapped his wings disdainfully and cast a cold eye towards the horizon: Laughing with inconsequent delight, she ran down the empty road until the blood pulsed warmly in her veins and she paused for lack of breath. It was spring—and it was very good to be alive.

The Post Office was an ordinary farm dwelling, small and unpretentious. The Post Mistress was a very old woman whose officialism was bolstered up by two stout sons, bachelors upon the far side of fifty and all as Scotch as the "pairritch" they loved. Lacking the pigeon-holes or letter-boxes of the usual post office, the good lady utilized her stairway, and put the various articles of mail upon the steps, held in place by the square red banister supports. Laura's step was third from the floor and she was delighted to behold a goodly number of letters and papers there for her. Mistress McLure held her gossiping for a while and then she made her way out

again into the spring air.

If ever any one felt content, she did. She carried no responsibility beyond the management of her school; her health was excellent, and she was in tune with the world. But as she neared the gate which led out to the highway again she saw far down the road a swiftly moving vehicle, rapidly disappearing along the shore road.

"John Cowie!" she said—and her light-heartedness fell from her, leaving her gravely anxious. John had made remarkable speed, with what results she could not know yet. But she did know that a great deal depended on the happenings of this day, and most sincerely she hoped that the estrangement of these two might gradually be healed. Why must people quarrel? They might much more sensibly ignore their differences and enjoy life comfortably.

Mrs. McCoy came home before dark to give a good account of Mary and her boy. Mr. Harris' tall daughter was installed in the Cowie household to look after things, so she felt at ease about the youngster and his mother. She surveyed with amusement the stripe that the cream had left upon the wall and ceiling, for it seemed that the same thing had happened to her when she first began to use the barrel churn.

"I had aye been used with a dasher churn, ye ken," she explained, "an' the lid o' it was so open ye didna need tae lat the wind off it. I'm awfu' obliged it's dune, for hech, sirs, I'm weary the nicht efter fechtin' an' warkin' a' they hoors wi' puir Mary Cowie. But 'tis a fine wee bairn—oh, ay, an' awfu' like John!"

It had been an uneventful day to Kerry, yet one that stood out in his memory as very pleasant and altogether delightful. John Hayes, coming in rather late, found a lunch left upon the table for him, and so departed quietly to rest for the even breathing told him that the weary household slept. The wheels of Time moved steadily forward, and in their calm progress developed many things—even crowding spectacular John Hayes into the dimness of the background! Laura, at all events, had quite forgotten him.

CHAPTER XII

AN IMPROMPTU NURSE

MARY'S baby was a remarkable child. Never was a baby known with such intelligence, such pink little toes and wonderfully expressive eyes. The captivating manner in which he doubled his tiny fists, and the mighty vigor with which he kicked his diminutive legs, evoked constant and unfailing admiration from Laura. He was a darling, she said; but candor forces me to admit that for smugness of countenance, jaundiced complexion, absence of hair, and unmistakable lung-power in the wee sma' hours of the morning, he was very much the same as other infants who have landed upon this planet from time to time.

Mary, quiet as usual, made no demonstration, watching John narrowly for she knew not what. He was delighted with his boy, yet frankly awkward and afraid of him. Reverently he would lift the small squirming bundle and offer a great finger for the tiny hand to close upon. His keen, deep eyes met the blinking wide orbs of his son squarely and honestly. The boy was wonderful to him, and he hoped, oh, how he hoped—that Mary, through the child, might find content and happiness again.

For himself, he was willing to be somewhat miserable, if only she might learn to be her old light-hearted self once more. He thought that by keeping out of her way, and not thrusting his offending presence upon her, he might some time win her forgiveness for the crime of loving her and marrying her. And so the pitiful game of cross questions and crooked answers went on unchecked. . . .

The days lengthened: the children brought bunches of Mayflowers to school in warm, eager little hands to glorify the bare old room. Flies buzzed in at the windows, and from the swamp near by large hungry mosquitoes fared forth—not single spies, but in battalions! The bats also became lively, and scuttered in the wall, squeaking like mice, and causing Laura to revolve many schemes for their extermination. On moist, sultry days they were most objectionable, but the natives regarded them not at all.

John Hayes came and went on his weekly trips, but Laura, for the time at least, succeeded in ignoring him. He seemed so subdued that she began to feel sorry for him and to forget the domineering characteristics which had so annoyed her. Even his quietness was marked by the same concentrated energy that showed in his speech and action. She had the feeling that he might break loose in some other direction, having been restrained so much against his will in his love-making.

It seemed as if life had settled down into an even jog trot. It is ever thus. For weeks together things go smoothly, and then every farm along

the concession erupts spontaneously; children break out with mumps, chimneys take fire, bees swarm, daughters elope, prodigal sons return, ribs get broken, horses run away, roofs blow off and the giant turns over in his sleep and settles down for another nap. To Laura the weeks melted away like icicles in the sun, steady drop by steady drop, and all alike. Except for the progress Kerry was making with his beloved correspondence course, she could not see that there was much happening.

One cool afternoon in late May, she came home from school wishing a little that something would turn up to break the monotony. She no longer gave Dora music lessons, as the practising disturbed Mary's baby; she missed even that vague diversion. She was experiencing in a small measure the desert-island, Robinson-Crusoe feeling that comes to one who is thrown among people of an altogether different mental and physical standard. Yet Laura was fortunate in Mrs. McCoy and Kerry, for they had minds and used them. She might have found herself in a community where, surrounded by people like Francie, the Abercrombies, and the Harrises, there would have been no congeniality. Few minds are so well-nourished that they can, like the camel, live on their "hump" under such circumstances. A few—a very few—have the gift of drawing sparks from very common flint and steel, and so make a fire to warm themselves intellectually wherever they go. Laura had something of this, perhaps, but the faculty was undeveloped as yet.

On this particular afternoon she could see as she neared the house that something *had* happened. There was a scuttering upon the verandah, where various articles were hung over the railing. The door opened and shut vigorously more than once. Vague presentiment seized her—there were so many things that might happen!

When she entered the kitchen, however, everything looked very peaceful, except that Francie, in semi-decollete dress, occupied the great rocking-chair by the stove. “Drunk again!” thought Laura disdainfully. Kerry, on the couch, was smiling amusedly, while his mother stirred an odorous concoction upon the stove.

“A wee drappie o’ Johnny Walker tae gie it a flayvur, wad ye no’?” Francie said earnestly. “I hae riskit ma life for the yowlin’ pig—dinna be stent wi’ me!”

“Sup it doon,” she said uncompromisingly, “Ye’ll no miss Johnny Walker gin ye swally yon.”

He took the mug in his hand and sniffed at it tentatively. Then he bolted it manfully. The result was evidently painful. He clapped himself on the chest and opened his mouth gasping, as he leaped up and pranced about the floor, his much-darned socks of bright blue giving a note of color to the scene. He still held the mug in one hand, waving it like a weapon. “Ow—ow—” he gurgled. “It’s the last o’ puir auld Francie—ye ha’ roasted ma inside wi’ yon ginger brew!”

“Sit doon, ye auld fule, an’ dinna brak the mug!” she told him with firmness. “Ye’ll be

the better o' that while ye live—I can mak' ginger tea would repent ony man o' his sins!"

Laura had stood watching in mild amaze. Mrs. McCoy turned to her while Francie allowed himself to subside into the chair.

"Ye see, it was like this," she explained. "The auld horse leaned hissel' to scratch on the door o' the well-house, an' he skived it doon frae the hinges. There is nae a pump at the stable, ye ken—we draw up the water to the trough for the beasts. Weel, Francie lat the pigs oot o' the pen, an' behold ye, the silly wee things, they couldna be awa' frae it. Yin falls plop! doon inta the well. Then Francie wi' micht an' main, cries on me ta draw it oot, an' before I can rin oot wi' the lather (ladder) tae him, he's awa' doon in hissel' efter it!"

Francie, much stimulated by the ginger tea, broke in excitedly. "Ay, I keeks doon, an' I sees my wee pig, soomin' aroon on the tope o' the water an' roarin' an' cryin' on me. 'Dinna greet,' I says, 'Francie'll no see ye droon!' An' I sclambered doon efter him. I didna like tae pit ma airms aroon him, an' he fought awfu' wild, but I didna lat him droon—no, no—Francie wadna see him droon!"

"An' then," went on Mrs. McCoy accusingly, "naethin' wad dae him but he must rin oot on the front verandy to change hissel!" Francie looked sheepishly from one to the other, and muttered in self defence, "Ou, it was fine an' warm oot there!"

Laura laughed. "Oh, well, Francie, you'll be all right if you do not take cold," she said.

He made no answer, for he had never forgiven her for ejecting Jakie so summarily. Something made him suddenly think of his pet, and he jumped up crying, "Whaur's my wee dog Jakie? He'll be doon the well—he'll be doon the well!"

"Oh, no," Mrs. McCoy assured him. "I pit the door in its place again, and Jakie is oot be yer flannin's. I'll awa' noo an' fix the hinges o' the door that it disna mak' trouble again."

She betook herself away in pursuit of this task and Laura went on to her room to put away her wraps, for late as it was. the air was cool from the lake, morning and evening. She had forgotten her dullness in amusement over the old Scotchman's adventure. "There is something happening here nearly all the time," she mused. "I used to think it must be very quiet and wearisome in the country, but it doesn't last long that way. Look at the things that have happened since I came here!" and she reviewed the various incidents, forgetting that, only an hour before, the world had seemed very uneventful and monotonous.

She was to have further proof of the adventurous possibilities of this place, for while supper was in progress Crombie came to the door to ask her to come with him.

"Why, what is wrong, Mr. Abercrombie?" she asked, rising from her chair at the table, truly startled by his white, quivering face.

"It's Benaiah," he explained. "The youngster was waterin' the cows after school and they got pushin' each other. Some way they knocked him down and—he musta' been trampled on.

I didn't find him—not for a little while. John Cowie's away to get the doctor, and the young one is in such pain—" he paused and moistened his lips. "He ast for you, Teacher. Will you come?"

She hurried into her coat and hat, while Mrs. McCoy wisely thrust her heavy dressing-gown into a small satchel, with comb and brush. She also rolled up a much worn white cotton sheet, and wrapped it carefully in a paper.

"The doctor'll maybe's ask for that—they use an awfu' amount o' white cotton in sickness."

Laura snatched up her gloves, and passed out into the clear, cool May twilight with Crombie. He helped her into the buggy and started the horse at a good speed. It was one of the rangy, mangy team which had brought her from town on the night of her arrival in January—but she did not know this, being sublimely indifferent to the personality of horses.

Crombie lived not far from John Cowie's, and the nearest way was by the bush road which ran northwest back of the school. It was not a good road by night, as tree trunks, roots and fallen branches lay in wait for the unwary. Therefore they went down past the school, along the corduroy road through the thick growing swamp where it was already as dark as when John Hayes had come to seek her on the night of the storm; on down towards the Indian Clearance, where the silver birches stood white and ghostly in the dusk, and the lake, clear and cold, spread out towards the western glow of the dying sunset; north among close standing pines and

maples of second growth, where only that afternoon little Benaiah had run like a squirrel and rejoiced in the coming of spring.

And she had let herself complain that nothing happened!

She began to wish that she knew something of first-aid principles. The few theories she had gleaned at school seemed altogether inadequate in the face of this disaster. These people looked to her as to one who knew something more than they did—but of what avail is academic information in such an emergency? Brought face to face with the crises of life, what help could she find in her fragmentary knowledge of botany and bookkeeping, the commentaries of Caesar and the propositions of Euclid?

They spoke but little, and she recollectcd that on the occasion of her first drive with him she had spoken even less. Very soon they arrived at the little low house, and she entered without ceremony.

It was the kitchen of course: the supper stood upon the table and the younger children sat round-eyed before their empty plates, having been ordered to stay there out of the way. The fried potatoes were cold in the bowl, the thick slices of bread lay untouched upon their plate, and the home-cured pork was solid in its own congealed grease. The baby in his high chair was fast asleep, his rosy mouth open and his fat arm under his head. Poor baby! Nothing less than a calamity of the first order could have caused his mother so to neglect him.

On a low old home-made couch, hard and

springless, lay the limp boyish form, from which came a moan with every laboured breath. Mrs. Abercrombie knelt beside him rubbing the cold hands, or smoothing his fair disordered hair, and murmuring little broken mother-words eloquent of love and suffering.

"There now, there now," she crooned, watching him with anxious eyes, "We'll fix you up right away—mother's little man!"

Sometimes the pain was too much for him and swept him down to merciful unconsciousness; then piercing hungrily through that kindly mist, it drew him out again into renewed torture. One of the animals had trampled upon his side with heavy unhurried foot, and had effected unknown havoc among the ribs, so that the child could not breathe without terrible pain. What else might be amiss they could only guess.

He saw her and knew her and she, too, knelt beside him, with a gentle smile of sympathy. The questioning, troubled eyes of the older woman filled with tears suddenly, as the girl laid her smooth hand upon the boy's hard, calloused little palm. Her own hands were hard and calloused too, and perhaps not as grateful to the touch as Laura's. A storm of helpless jealousy took possession of her as she saw how his anguished eyes brightened when they fell upon the face of his beloved teacher. Poor soul—she would have suffered anything to help her boy, yet in his extremity he forgot her for this girl who, six months ago, had been a stranger to him!

"Please, teacher," he breathed painfully in a voice as faint as the flutter of a leaf, and Laura

bent close to catch the words—"Sing!"

Sing! In the face of that heart-rending misery, how could she lift up her voice in joyous song? Yet how, indeed, could she refuse those pleading eyes? She began uncertainly with a voice that quavered and occasionally dried up in her throat, and she sang very softly and tenderly the little hymn he had asked for that afternoon at school:

"Safe in the arms of Jesus,
Safe on His gentle breast,
There by His love o'er-shaded
Sweetly my soul shall rest."

Crombie entered as she finished. He had put away the horse for the night, feeling that he had done everything it was in his power to do, and now he proceeded to show himself in a new light to Laura. She had regarded him as coarse and ignorant, a little household tyrant—and no doubt he was all of this and more too. But Crombie loved his wife and loved his children, and love is a lamp which shines clearest on the darkest night.

He brought a fancy upholstered stool from the "Room" for Laura to sit on, and relieved her of her wraps. He touched his wife's arm and drew her to her feet.

"Leave him be with the Teacher a while," he counselled, "and round up them young ones to bed. Lay down a little yourself so's to be ready agin the Doctor comes."

She shook her head at first, unwilling to leave the boy, but it was very true that the long night

was ahead of her, full of test that would require her strength. She lay down on the bed beside the baby when she had got the supper out of the way; and without at all intending to close her eyes, she slid down into much needed slumber.

As for Laura, she sang until she felt that her throat would be paralyzed. Each time she halted, the heavy blue lids lifted and the faint whisper begged for more. He seemed to rest while she sang; to his childish mind her voice was the most beautiful in the world. Little Benaiah was something of a hero-worshipper—and he had brought all his young heart to his teacher. She resorted to all the methods she had heard her sister mention for resting the singing apparatus under strain, until presently another thing began to alarm her—she had sung all she could think of!

Groping vainly in her mind for more, she began to hum a little and then there came back to her the lilting melody she had sung on the day when she splattered the cream about Mrs. McCoy's kitchen.

“Down the orchard path to me
Comes Mollie, singing.
Voice of April ecstasy,
Singing—singing.”

She sang it through for him, and his eyes glowed with pleasure.

“Please, Teacher—again!” his laboured whisper begged. She sang it again and again until the sprightly little spring song took on forever a background wherein the dim kitchen with its one lamp, its hurrying alarm clock, its oilcloth-

covered table, its bare floor and low ceiling, crowded out the gaiety from words and music.

At times Crombie came forward gently and gave the boy a little sip of water, and then Laura took the opportunity of stretching her tall frame by stepping out upon the small platform at the door and listening with all her keen hearing for the rattle of wheels. The helplessness of these people in the face of accident or sickness impressed itself vividly upon her, and she decided firmly to learn the principles of nursing before ever taking another school so far from medical aid.

About midnight came John Cowie and the doctor, and there was a breath taking interval while the little battered body was examined. Crombie had wakened his wife, who was promptly instructed to muster all the lamps in the house. The garments were cut away from the bruised side after the boy had been given an opiate. The doctor examined as well as he could, looked at the clock and scanned the eastern sky. "I'll need daylight," he decided and wished most earnestly he had another doctor and a trained nurse to see him through.

Mrs. Crombie kept watch while the rest were strictly instructed to sleep. Then when the daylight shone in through the window she was sent over to Mrs. Cowie's, and presently the word went forth that there would be no school that day.

Laura was no quitter—she hated a quitter, and so, while John Cowie dropped the ether according to the doctor's brief instructions, she carried out his other orders for little Benaiah's life perhaps, rested upon the steadiness of her

head and hands. It was her first experience, and she went through it even to the cleansing of the doctor's instruments after the work was over.

"Say, young lady—I don't even know your name—but you ought to take up nursing," he said with admiration in his shrewd grey eyes, when everything was in order again and the child, still quiescent under the anaesthetic, lay in the bed, where Laura's clever hands had warmed the blankets and taken the chill from the "company" pillows.

Laura looked at him with eyes gone suddenly blank. She had sung for half the night, pouring out her sympathy like "the gentle rain from Heaven." She had assisted that morning at a task requiring every atom of self control and intelligent aid she could give. Now with true inconsistency, her knees calmly let her down upon the floor.

Crombie knew one admirable remedy in all disasters—and turned to it unfailingly.

"Just a little Johnny Walker now, doctor, would fetch her to in a whistling." He licked his own lips as he said it, for he never had been the man to throw a drink over his shoulder.

"Trot out and get a pail of water," said the doctor stooping to the girl. "Don't be a lobster!"

Just what Dr. Ellery meant by a "lobster" no one knew, but the intonation of his voice gave an impression that it was very far down on the social scale indeed. Laura was a substantial young lady and he found himself unable to lift her. He put his head out at the door

and called John Cowie who had started away for home.

"It seems that the heart of a knight-errant is no good to a man unless he has the strength of an ox," lamented the doctor to himself. "I'd envy any man the chance to hold such a girl as that in his arms, even lifting her off the floor—and behold you, it's this solemn old father-of-a-family that draws the prize!"

Laura opened her eyes upon John Cowie's face, full of kindly concern and she thought, irrelevantly enough, what a tremendous thing it would be to hold the love of a man like that. She looked long and directly at him with her disconcerting gaze. He had submerged his own misery and was trying to live above it.

"Mary had better be careful," Laura told herself, "or presently when she begins to want John's love it will be too late. He will smother it out before she knows what is happening."

"Are you all right now?" he asked in his deep, pleasant voice as he saw the vagueness of her expression give way to understanding.

"Oh yes, thank you—I was just a little dizzy. Thank you, Mr. Abercrombie—this is very thoughtful!" she raised her head and drank deeply from the old tin dipper which Crombie in reproachful agitation had brought to her.

Presently he found occasion to suggest to the doctor that his own nerves would be the better of a moderate bracer, but the man of medicine read him a brief and very pointed lecture.

"Man," he said with contempt, "your son lies yonder between life and death—is this a

time to make a beast of yourself with liquor? Have respect for the child if you have none for yourself!"

He gave his instructions to the girl, and was off. He had miles to travel, for other broken and diseased bodies hung upon his skill and judgment. There were few doctors on the Peninsula, yet it groaned with accidents by water and by land.

It was Friday, and Laura had agreed to stay until Sunday evening, if the boy needed her so long. She therefore sent down to Mrs. McCoy's for such clothes as she might require, and lay down to rest while Benaiah was quiet. She had never anticipated this sort of thing as part of her teaching experiences! What a long way she had come within eighteen hours, from lamenting the dullness of life—to this! For all her excitement, she slept soundly, for she was young and healthy, and had the consciousness of duty performed.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DOCTOR'S ORDERS

L AURA sang herself out for little Benaiah, and then to his great delight she began to make up rhymes for him. It was very pleasant, for he approved so tremendously of everything she did, and sometimes even laughed—although this hurt him exceedingly. So she kept her fun very mild, and occupied his demands by the telling of stories for him.

“God has saved your life, Benaiah,” she said to him seriously one time. “Remember He has something waiting for you to do somewhere—something important—so try to grow strong and find out what it is!”

His eyes, wide and prophetic, fastened upon hers; not all teaching is done within the school walls.

There came what she called a “jolt,” about the time that she was getting ready to go away from Crombie’s. Neither he nor his wife had spoken a word of gratitude to her—an omission which she had not noticed, but now Crombie approached with the suggestion that she should board with them until mid-summer and teach Benaiah at home, as it was quite evident the child would not be able to attend school for some time.

"You see," argued the excellent man, "I pay my school taxes reg'lar. I suppose I pay more'n anybody round here—an' yit my boy ain't goin' to git any more good out of it now. You come on up and look after him, and I'll see you don't lose anything by not teaching on Friday!"

The candid greed of the man hurt Laura deep down in her generous heart, and she opened her lips to wither him from the toes up, but somehow there intervened the memory of his genuine anxiety over the boy, and his gentle ministrations during the time of urgent need. "That is the real Crombie, after all," she thought magnanimously, "and it is love for Benaiah which prompts this extraordinary proposal."

She was seated in the doctor's buggy, for he was to take her back to Mrs. McCoy's, and at her silence and consternation, he took fire.

"Say, Crombie, you lobster, don't forget to pay this young lady for assisting me at that operation. That's \$5, and you owe her two dollars a day for caring for your youngster since then. Giddap, Jumbo! I'll send my bill in later!" and with this thunderbolt, he departed. He stole a glance at the girl's face presently, and found it very white and tired. Inwardly he called up a few convenient swear words.

"Just give me a chance at him, the close-fisted, narrow-minded, pigeon-toed little skin-flint!" he exclaimed with a most engaging sincerity. "Just let me get him with his feet as high as his head—I'll put him on low diet, and warm him with mustard plasters until he won't know whether he's dead or alive—or care!"

She flashed him a look of surprise—but the “Perhaps I had better walk,” she suggested coldly. “You seem to forget that Mr. Abercrombie is a friend of mine!”

He swallowed so much all at once that he fairly choked. “Friend!” he exploded. “May the Lord preserve me from friends like that!”

“You won’t need to trouble the Lord about it,” she came back, even more frostily. “It is not likely that friends of any kind will worry you much.”

And right here the bitter hurt conquered and the tears overflowed as much at the thought of her own harsh words to the good doctor, as at the pain of Crombie’s ingratitude. She had given music lessons to little Pandora—gratis. She had ignored the claims of her school to help save his boy’s life, and what she had done had come freely from a heart that knew not greed or guile. The thought of living with such people day after day was simply abhorrent to her—yet she could not let the doctor hold them up to scorn. Moreover she had one of those “contrary” consciences which invariably insist upon making their owners do absurd and heroic things—and this unreasonable conscience began to prepare a bed of thorns for her. Benaiah needed her—and if she refused to go, it would be simply from a consideration for her own comfort—so said conscience.

Dr. Ellery regarded her tears helplessly in self-accusing silence—which if he had known it, was far the safest attitude for him.

“I don’t want to board there—but I suppose I ought to go!” she wailed, forgetting all about

him. But he had sense and energy too, and he lost no time in impressing the welcome fact that Benaiah was not to be troubled with lessons.

"It's almost June—then come the summer holidays. By the time fall arrives, he'll be fit and ready again. Now don't worry over that young man—worry a little about me—you hurt my feelings most shamefully!"

She dried her eyes with a wan little smile.

"I had to hurt somebody's feelings," she said.

"You make a thorough job of those things," he told her ruefully, which caused them both to laugh.

She said good-bye to him at the gate and would not even let him carry her satchel to the house. "You are a busy man," she reminded him. He drew a long breath, looking straight into her eyes.

"I'll be a busier man than I am now if I can't find time to get better acquainted with you," he said bluntly, in a fashion so direct that the embarrassed red shot into her cheeks again.

"You are taking advantage of circumstances which are not of my choosing," she answered, with a poise which even the stately Julia might have envied—and turned away.

"Now wait," he commanded in his masterful professional manner.

She halted for a moment and he spoke eagerly.

"Forget it. I didn't mean it except as I might have said it in sincerity to another man. I'm going to see that sick youngster again next Sunday, and I'll call for you to go with me. Don't forget that—and, say, don't be too hard

on me—I'm only human and liable to drop dead any minute. Think how sorry you would feel hen!"

"Well, I can't go with you on Sunday until four o'clock. I'm organist for the church services. I can't neglect that to go visiting!"

"They certainly got value for their money when they got you here as teacher!" he commented with enthusiasm. "Nurse, advisor, instructor, organist—"

"You can see for yourself how busy I am," she said wearily. "I should think you would be busy too— Good night!"

So she left him in the dusk of early evening and turned herself with relief to the house which was becoming more and more a home to her. It seemed an age since she went away, yet everything was immaculately the same. Kerry's eyes glowed with welcome and Mrs. McCoy was unfeignedly glad to see her, while even Francie cast a look in her direction which might not have been as hostile as it seemed.

Knowing their kindly interest, so far removed from idle inquisitiveness, she told them her adventures freely after Francie had gone out to "bed up" everything for the night. She even told them the preposterous suggestion of Crombie that she should board with him for the good of Benaiah's education.

"If the youngster is able to come here during the holidays, I will be glad to take him in hand," Kerry said, flushing a little over his own presumption. She bent her earnest gaze upon him with gratitude, for this offer relieved her of

responsibility, yet provided against any neglect of Benaiah.

No one expressed any opinion of Crombie's attitude, but like the Dutchman's cat, they did a lot of thinking—and the result with Mrs. McCoy was that she decided it was a misunderstanding on Laura's part—or, if Crombie did say it, that he didn't mean it. Kerry allowed himself a jealous gratitude towards the young doctor—and a brief sigh that he had not fallen into such capable hands at the time of his own accident.

School went on as usual, except that a little of the snap had gone from it. Benaiah had been one of those particularly comforting scholars whose influence on the rest of the school is for law and order, progress and pleasant expansion. His stuttering was gradually leaving him, under her loving patience, and he was really getting along well. Now his place was empty. She threw herself earnestly into the work and by the end of the week had brought herself back to the old outlook again, and the old serenity reigned in her heart as of yore.

When Dr. Ellery made his visit to Benaiah on Sunday, he waited for her at the school until the afternoon service had ended and took her with him. He was very much attracted by her straightforward sympathetic manner, and began to find her very good to look at. She would never be beautiful except to the eyes that loved her, but the glow of youth and health illuminated her rather irregular features, and her animated expression was as pleasant as the gentle calm which invariably succeeded it. There was

a daintiness about her mentally and physically—a purity of soul and body that surrounded her like a halo—an unrealized armor against all darts of evil, built from her own upward-looking thoughts and her mother's faithful prayers. Fortunate indeed are those girls who face life so protected.

At the Abercrombie home, they found a serious state of affairs. Benaiah was in a high fever, tossing painfully in his dark little room. When Laura had left him the previous Sunday the wound in his side had seemed clean and healthy, and Mrs. Abercrombie had had strict instructions for the careful treatment thereof. Dr. Ellery questioned the mother sharply, and drew forth the information that she had resorted to her own methods of recovering the child, by poulticing the place with a slice of salt pork, and by giving the youngster a good meal of sausages with a few mustard pickles and kindred dainties.

It seemed to Laura that she could quite willingly have forgiven the doctor for a few sincere fragments of profanity, but Dr. Ellery was too deeply concerned in his patient to waste any time on idle words. He shook his head despairingly.

"She might far better have left him alone altogether, and given him nothing but water! Such a woman! The poor youngster has to pay for her carelessness—criminal carelessness! Do you suppose I can make her realize—"

He did his best—he certainly did his best, but the hopelessness of trying to impress on her the necessity of non-interference, patience while Nature knit up the torn flesh and wounded organs,

was very depressing to both Laura and himself.

"What chance does a man have in a case like this?" he broke out savagely. "The boy's own mother won't take the trouble to obey orders for the sake of her son's life! You see what the poor youngster is like—hasn't one chance in fifty, although a week ago he was in good shape, and had no poison in his system. Now he's full of it. Pah—you think you love your child—you don't know how to love a child! Nine years old, and feeding him on sausages and mustard pickles—it's nothing but sheer laziness on your part, because you do not want to bother yourself to prepare suitable food for him, or to refuse him what isn't good for him! He's too sick to move, or I'd take him to the hospital to-night, but I'll send a trained nurse out first thing in the morning, and you'll not lift a finger to interfere with her—you hear me?"

Laura, to her sickening distaste, was peremptorily ordered to stay the night with the child. "Can't trust him with his mother," said the doctor scathingly. Crombie was inclined to bluster, but the poor woman broke down and cried. "He made me do it—oh, don't be too hard on me, doctor—" as though the doctor held her fate and her boy's in his hand! "I'll do just whatever you say—if Crombie will let me!"

Then the doctor took Crombie substantially in hand, and for a few minutes dissected his character completely and definitely, leaving him much reduced and abased. As Mrs. Abercrombie promised faithful adherence to orders, she was allowed

to resume care of her son for that night, although the doctor was firm in his determination to send out a nurse in the morning.

"I'm not able to pay a high-priced girl in a white pinny to set around here for nothing!" remonstrated Crombie somewhat peevishly.

"You will find it a dashed sight more expensive if you let your boy die of neglect!" retorted the doctor with quiet significance. Crombie wilted.

So they fixed up the little fellow as well as they could and presently they left. Dr. Ellery was so wrought up that when he untied the horse and turned its head away from the Crombie establishment, he walked instead of making use of his buggy, and the patient animal walked along behind him. Laura at his side, was amused through her depression to see him wave his arms and gesticulate wildly in the endeavor to work off his exasperation.

"The country needs children — home-grown, healthy, native-bred, taught by our own Canadian school teachers and browned by sun and wind. It's rank wastefulness to throw them away, lose them for the sake of a few dollars. I know these people can't afford big doctor bills—nurses—all that sort of thing. It's miles to town—no telephones around here—and automobiles are expensive—these roads 'ud tear the wheels off them anyway. What chance does a doctor have when the—well, you saw what they did!"

Broken, incoherent words he poured forth, wrought upon by his boyish enthusiasm for a great profession, yet overwhelmed by the weight

of ignorance opposed to him. Laura felt sorry for him, sorry for Mrs. Abercrombie striving timidly against her husband, and most of all she felt a great surge of pity for little Benaiah. The child pays, not only for the sins of the parents, but also for their mistakes and for their lack of knowledge. Poor little Benaiah!

She put her hand understandingly upon Dr. Ellery's arm.

"Now you are being hard on yourself," she said gently. "You must reserve all that sympathy and be strictly impersonal. Do you always groan for everybody's rheumatism? Forget the Crombie household—you are missing all the lovely sunset!"

They stood still a few moments, and the wise horse halted behind them while the wild glory of the scene sank into their hearts. The changeful bay was darkly lined by fitful gusts of wind, and far out the whitecaps frothed and threatened. The red sun sank angrily, throwing gory hues across the furrowed water. A few gloomy, low-lying clouds held the same feverish light upon their edges, and the whole picture was circled and woven with thick matted evergreens and the naked tracery of unleaved maples.

He drew a long breath, recovering his equilibrium, and patted her hand in frank comradeship. "Jump in the buggy!" he said briskly, never thinking that he might be expected to help her in. She was young and able-bodied—why should he affect to believe that she needed any more help than he did? "You know just what to say to a man when he is down in the

lip, don't you? Will you come up to Crombie's with me when I go again?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so," she said, beginning to think of the comment that would arise. "There is no need for me to go again—the nurse will be there."

He did not press the question, and their talk turned presently to other things. At last he left her at the orchard gate in the gathering twilight as he had done the previous Sunday, only now she was not weary, and her wide eyes glowed like lamps, while her dark hair, blown by the rising wind, whipped about her flushed face. "By Jove! I like to look at you!" he blurted out with refreshing candor.

She drew back a little startled, with something less of childlike confidence in her eyes. She was beginning to have her doubts of young men—as a class. If he thought these things, he would do well to keep silence on the subject. Her unspoken reproach touched him.

"Don't be annoyed," he pleaded awkwardly. "I can remember my little sister looking at me with just such eyes—she has been dead for twelve years!"

"I'm sorry—" she spoke with genuine feeling, but her dismissal was equally definite. "Good-night."

So he drove away, and she turned towards the house. A presentiment of storm filled the air; vague rumblings and swift distant flashes foretold the electric battle. In the deepening darkness the trees swayed eerily under the moaning wind and the booming of the water on the

shore a mile away was loud and overwhelming. There was disaster in the air, and she thought with a shiver of the long night miles that stretched between Dr. Ellery and his snug town office. She thought of little Benaiah, flushed, delirious, throwing his hot hands from side to side and fretting with the mounting pain. Why had she not stayed with him? Her school was less important than the child's life. However, it was his mother's privilege to care for him in this emergency—they had not wanted the intrusion of an outsider.

A flash of lightning that fairly seemed to split the sky struck terror to her heart. The storm was crowding close. The first spatters of rain dashed upon her as she ran towards the door and flung it open, and an earth-shaking clamor of thunder filled the air as she slammed it shut after her.

She had no idea of the restlessness that was beginning to grow in Kerry's heart from her friendship with the doctor. Unsure of himself, he sensed a rival in every other man to whom she gave any of her attention. His own incapacity irked him. How was he to know that his helplessness helped him more with Laura than any strength or ability could have done? And he lost nothing by comparison with other men. The trouble was that he did not know these things. He must simply wait for her as she passed back and forth intent upon a hundred urging interests, and hope to make a place for himself in her life by the sheer force of person-

ality, his own great passion and the shadowy possibilities of the future. He felt an unwavering certainty that just around the corner complete physical manhood waited for him somehow—mysteriously his. Laura believed the same, having faith in Providence no less than in the surgical ability of her mother's old friend, Dr. John Gregory.

He had sense enough to keep his jealousy to himself, but he watched her narrowly, keenly, dreading the self-consciousness that might betray an awakening interest elsewhere which he, poor lad, would be powerless to combat. But Laura was supremely undisturbed by these under currents, although she felt a very feminine uneasiness in a thunderstorm, and was glad of the lamp and the society of other people.

"It's going to be a big storm, Kerry," she said somewhat nervously. "I'm glad I got home when I did."

She tossed her hat and gloves to a chair and laid her little jacket over the back of it. The boy's face lighted up. "Can you feel that this is 'home' to you, Laura?" he asked happily.

"Why—yes," she answered, gravely considering. "I think it is a very home-like place, and I feel quite free and unconstrained, just as if I were with my mother. There is only one little improvement I could think of—if there was just a big old-fashioned fireplace for logs."

"But there is!" he cried in delight. "There is a fireplace in yonder, only it is all boarded up, and papered over the top of it. I'm going to

have it opened and a great fire roaring in it—some day!"

"Won't that be fine!" she agreed with unfeigned pleasure, heedless of the rain that hurled itself upon the small windows and the mighty tempest that roared about the house. He set his big hands to the wheels of his chair and worked it across the floor nearer to her. "The storm makes such a noise!" he explained smiling.

With a sudden furious blast the wind whirled against the door which Laura had, perhaps, imperfectly closed. It flung open, and the rush of air caused the little lamp to flicker and go out. A terrific flash of lightning shot its lurid glare across the room and brought Laura in pure panic into the circle of Kerry's arm, where she clung gasping with her face hidden against him while the mighty din of the thunder caused her to shiver from head to foot. As the rattle died away she was conscious of another sound, swift, heavy, and very near. It was the first time she had ever held her ear so close to a man's heart.

His arm tightened about her, as the fearful whistle and supernatural illumination told of another great ball of fire cast to the earth not very far away, and the tremendous shattering concussion of the thunder shook her to the very soul. The sound of that swift beating against her ear was deeply comforting, and she made no move to leave him until presently the chilly air from the open door recalled her to the actual state of affairs. He released her reluctantly. The storm had spent its energy upon those two

great shocks, and though the rain was falling in torrents the electric display was over.

She closed the door and lighted the lamp, feeling that there was a great deal of color in her face. Kerry had recovered his poise and turned his gaze to the window, where the fitful flashes told of the retreating enemy.

"I suppose mother and Francie are worrying about us," he said irrelevantly. "Jakie is sick and mother went out to help Francie give him some medicine—it must have been worth seeing!"

When Francie and Mrs. McCoy came in, they reported Jakie as most revolutionary in manner, and so cranky that even his food did not agree with him.

"I'm houpin' he's weel the morn's morn," said Francie with a dour glance which implicated them all as enemies of his "wee dog."

"Ow," said Mrs. McCoy sententiously, "He'll be weel again—or he'll be deid. I'll hae no invaylid dogs aboot here."

"Then ye'll no ha' me!" flung out the valiant Francie. "Gin ye canna keep ma dog—I'll awa'!"

"Dinna blether! There's nae ither buddy frae end ta end o' this Peninsula wad bother ta hae ye, or yer dog eithers. Think shame tae yersel', an' awa' to bed! Haud yer wheesht aboot sich'n objec' as yon bag o' snarls. He's nae cattle dog, nae watch dog, an' he hasna the manners to be juist a plain common dog. Whit wey sud I feed him tatties for to be paid wi' gowlin' an' girnin'?"

Francie did a little gowlin' and girnin' of

his own, and Laura seeing him bring forth his inevitable pipe, retreated, but not before she had caught a look in Kerry's eyes that brought the blood rushing to her face again.

Through all her dreams she heard the steady music of that beating heart.

CHAPTER XIV

THE GLORY OF VISION

JUNE—with the fragrance of wild flowers, the cheerful twitter of birds, the tender green of newly-opened leaves, and the radiance of advancing summer! June—with sunlight on the lovely water, and delicate breezes to temper the mounting heat! Laura never forgot that June with its serene happiness, day after day of the pure joy of living. There was no despotic urge to drive her hurrying through the golden hours. Her sorrows were but borrowed cares from other lives. She had not known that anything could be as pleasant as the work she was doing with the eager youngsters who, if they came short in scholastic attainments, were at least anxious to learn and very easy to control, and gentle in behavior.

It was therefore rather a surprise to Laura when one of the children ran into the school one day at noon hour with awe-struck countenance and reported that Pandora Abercrombie had been swearing.

“Swearing! Oh no—Pandora would not do that!” she declared rebukingly. “I know she wouldn’t say naughty words!”

The weeping child was ushered in by her

schoolmates, whose shocked little faces showed that somebody had certainly been saying something. Laura had never known the attitude of judge and criminal. Her sympathetic methods did not meet the approval of most of the rate-payers, who remembered only autocratic pedagogues who "made them mind!" However, she followed her own course and had success with it, as now; for when she put her arm about Pandora and dried her eyes upon a faintly perfumed handkerchief, she met neither fear nor evasion.

"What's it all about, dear?" she asked gently, and Pandora drew forth a gay red and blue striped pencil.

"Please, Teacher," she sobbed, while her hot little hand insinuated itself into Laura's and she bowed her wet face comfortably upon the immaculate white shoulder.

"Well, what about it? Tell me, Pandora."

"Please, Teacher, the doctor gave it to me, an'an'—Please Teacher, I only just said what he said!"

"And what did he say?" persisted Laura.

"Please Teacher, he—he said it was a devil of a pencil!"

A low chorus from the rest of the children told that this was the offending language. "What!" said Laura, undeniably startled. "Why did he say that?"

"Please Teacher, I don't know, but that's what he said," replied Pandora indulging in heavy sobs of fresh remorse.

Laura took the pencil in her hand thought-

fully. Why should the doctor speak so to a little girl? She felt rather resentful of his rudeness and vulgarity. She turned over the disturbing trifle, and on one of the six faces she read the printed word "Indelible." Light dawned upon her.

"He said it was an indelible pencil, didn't he?" she asked, much relieved. Pandora nodded.

"Please Teacher, yes. He said, 'Mind what you do with this, for it is a devil of a pencil!' Just like you said, Teacher, and I thought it was no harm for me to say it when he said it."

"Come, dry your tears—there is no harm done. I understand now what the doctor said. Take your places, all of you, while I explain, and then I want you to remember that you judged Pandora too quickly." For the space of a quarter of an hour she expounded and drilled, and finally when the meaning, spelling and pronunciation of the word "indelible" had been thoroughly impressed upon them, she spoke shortly of their error in condemning an innocent little girl.

She saw nothing amusing in the incident. It was a very grievous handicap to her that the children were so hampered in vocabulary, for one thing, that she could hardly be sure that they understood her when she read them even the simplest classics. Their limited experience gave her very little to build on, and the appalling dearth of reading matter bounded her upon every side. She considered the problem long and carefully. It was characteristic of her that she had adopted the whole community, and made the

the cares and joys of each individual her own. Yet she did not thrust herself upon anyone, but having a lively sympathy and a healthy interest in everything, she drew other people to her as the sun draws out the heart of a rose.

Her little yearly salary was two hundred and seventy-five dollars, and while not a very princely revenue, it was wealth compared with the incomes of the people whose children she taught. If she could not find the funds for a school library, neither could they, for they lacked the vision which has a blind spot for dollars when books are on sale. They felt no driving need of books —yet a few well chosen volumes would build for these children a Jacob's ladder to lift them high above the clods. Just such a few would kindle ambitions and start them on the way through the beautiful garden of literature where their natures might revel and bask in the assembled delights of the ages.

Being quite ignorant of the attitude of a paternal government on the subject of school libraries, she decided to let Julia do this, for that good sister had not failed to impress the fact that Laura must never, never let herself lack for funds. Therefore Laura very serenely applied to Julia for a school library. She placed her demands quite modestly within a limit of ten dollars, and from that time forward she lived in an atmosphere of publishers' lists, book catalogues and occasional sample copies.

"You know, Julia, you have as much right to be interested in these people and their children as I have, for they are Canadians and so they

are your people and mine most emphatically." Thus she wrote to her sister. "You said you would see that I always had money for anything I needed, but Julia, I can do without things that I *need* but I really must have the things I want. And I want some books for my children." ("Bless my heart!" ejaculated Julia at this candid confession) "I will make out the list and send it for you to forward with a cheque. I think I can get a book-case here."

With tremendous care she chose twelve books, weighing each one thoughtfully in the balance, for she must consider not only the children but their parents too. Therefore mythology got a cold shoulder, for it would be counted simply "lies"—and poor lies at that. Her books must not only be within the comprehension of the readers; they must serve a definite constructive purpose—and they must create an appetite for more. Let any one who feels inclined to sneer, undertake the same task of choice.

Thomas Law, the invaluable caretaker of the school, agreed to make a small shelf for her, and performed his work very neatly. She stained the clean white wood a comfortable brown, and, having sent away her carefully revised list, began to emerge from her absorption to see what was going on around her. She found that Francie had at last completed the seeding, which is to say, he had a certain amount of land under contract to produce oats. The wheat was anaemic and of a very poor complexion, but might make headway. Meanwhile, he strove with corn and "turmuts," to use his own word, while

the potato-planting had passed unnoticed by Laura's preoccupied head. Mrs. McCoy was as busy as he. They lacked the machinery which puts the "arm" into farming, and potatoes were a hand-labor crop from start to finish, as were also the corn and turnips. Kerry could not control his wretchedness. It was his work, his place—and his heart cried out with the anguish of a man who is set aside as useless.

"But Kerry," Laura reasoned one memorable day in late June, "How would it seem supposing things were the other way; if it were your mother who was—disabled—you would gladly do everything in your power for her, wouldn't you?"

"Yes—yes—anything! You know that!"

"And you would never feel it a burden unless she began to fret. Put yourself in her place, Kerry, and you will see that your fretting looks like simple ingratitude—selfishness." The gentle voice was full of kindness. She sought his eyes, dreading to hurt him, yet knowing that he longed to be hurt! He offered himself for a gratuitous stab, as a child with a silver in his finger welcomes the relieving needle in his mother's hand.

"Laura!" He reached out his big hand and laid it over hers, while the pain in his eyes was much for her as for himself. "It *is* selfish, isn't it, to consider my own side of it, rather than hers? She suffers in seeing me here, and she would only suffer more if I showed myself discontented. Well—" he went on presently, "Patience is an old man's virtue, but I could be so patient, so serene, if only I saw in the

future a glimmer of hope for that which is beyond my reach to-day!"

The big hand covering hers trembled a little, but her own lay warm and quiet and essentially comforting. "Then it wouldn't be patience if you were quite sure of results!" she said with a little laugh. "For my part I feel absolutely certain that it will not be long before you have your health again—something seems to tell me."

"I wasn't thinking of my health," he answered slowly, with eyes that probed deep into hers, halting the surprised question on her lips. What could mean more to him than his health? Yet even as she formed the unspoken query she found the answer, and the heating color flooded her cheeks. She caught her breath speechlessly, wondering if she had guessed aright. With a desperate concentration that showed how much it meant to him he said, so low that she scarcely heard him, "Oh, I have no right to ask—but I long to know!"

She rose unsteadily to her feet, poised for flight, and for a single instant laid his hand against her cheek. "Know, then—" she said softly—and fled.

In her own room she sat on the edge of the bed and trembled. What had she done? What would Kerry think of her? She thought she understood him—that he would not speak out his desires until he stood equal with other men physically. Yet it was his noble heart and mind that made him Kerry, and drew her to him in spite of all handicaps. She knew that he would not take any advantage of the open-

ing she had given, for he had honor. And then, because she was very young indeed, and had so suddenly sprung from the dreams of girlhood to the dazzling glory of the Vision, she dropped her face into her hands and let her thoughts go where they would. Fear and wonder thrilled her; a strange tremulous humility made her question why Kerry had found her desirable.

For the first time in her life she went to the mirror and looked at her reflection with critical eyes. "What ever can he see in that face?" she mused, not by any means charmed with her appearance. Yet she could not have told what displeased her—only she wanted to be beautiful so that he might be proud of her.

Something made her think, all at once, of her mother; she would not be at all in favor of this attachment—quite the contrary indeed. "It is because I'm so young," she whispered, "and because Kerry is so handicapped, for the present at least. But when she knows him, and sees how fine he is—oh surely, surely—" and she was off in a rosy dream again.

She looked out through the wide-flung window upon the pleasant landscape of hills and trees, green fields and winding fences. The bay rippled away to the horizon where the sun was drooping. How she loved the place, every twist and turn of it! It seemed as if she had known it always, and been aware of it before ever she saw it.

Mrs. McCoy came into the picture, driving the cows and young cattle from the bush. The clothes-line was strung with a flapping white array of garments, and Laura, reproaching her-

self that she had not thought of it before, went out with the basket to bring them in. She and Mrs. McCoy had made an arrangement about her washing, for there was little time after school hours for it, and Saturday was always busy with other things. So Mrs. McCoy put Laura's share through with the rest of the weekly gatherings and the result was highly satisfactory in every way, for Laura had not shown any great extravagance in the matter of white petticoats and fancy blouses, and she did show a great enjoyment in ironing. In fact, when once well started, she was inclined to go through the basket from start to finish, and had a proper pride in the smooth table cloths and towels, though to be sure she always raised cruel blisters on her hands with the iron handle.

She was glad now of a relief from her own thoughts and emotions. The clothes, sweet and clean, gave out the priceless perfume distilled of sun and wind and many rinsing waters.

Presently Francie came in sight with the lagging team. Old Job hung his head wearily, while the colt, tired but still alert, minced daintily along beside him. Jakie hobbled pessimistically behind the others, with a distrustful eye out for ground hogs and other evil doers. Soon the cows were barred into the stable yard to wait until milking time. Mrs. McCoy gathered the eggs into her apron, while Francie stabled his nags. Then all came in to supper.

Kerry, with his eyes rivetted upon the latest communication from his beloved correspondence school, heeded none of them. He had the Latin

fever in his blood, the strange, inexplicable germ that works in a man's brain and holds him fast in the enchantment of stately prose and deathless verse. His grave face bore its customary expression of quiet consideration. "I was mistaken!" thought Laura, with an inward sinking, as she shot a swift questioning glance in his direction. But as if in response to that unspoken appeal, his lids lifted suddenly and the powerful dark eyes contradicted her, triumphantly and masterfully!

Then he looked down at his paper again.

It was all over in a second, and he gave no further sign, but on the day when school closed, and she was preparing to go home for the long summer vacation, he contrived somehow a few words with her alone. She had very carefully endeavored to avoid this, and with considerable success. But he had his way, as she felt all along he would have.

"Everything will seem a little different to you after you have been at home for a while, Laura," he said, launching bravely into his subject. "You may find that rosy pictures look paler—at a distance. I shall be very happy with any share you can give me in your thoughts, great or small; that is—I shall be content for the present. But unless you forbid me, I shall come some day to ask a great thing of you. I cannot ask it now."

Oddly enough, this speech annoyed Laura; it seemed to take her the wrong way. She spoke a little cruelly:

"And if, when you ask—you find that some one else has been before you—what then?"

The boy's face grew very white and his mobile mouth tightened with lines of pain. He stared at his helpless hands.

"Then it has never been mine, and never could be, if any other man has power to take it away from me." The low constrained voice was full of unconscious pleading.

Laura was standing by the open window, and the late afternoon sun shone kindly upon her, striking gleams of red and gold in her dark hair. The color of health was in her smooth cheeks, and the candid eyes were bright and clear. Although she had decided within herself that it would be best under the circumstances to probe no further into this subject at present, there came an overmastering desire to *make him say it*—and yet she was restrained by a very feminine fear of what would happen when he did say it! She had no scruples about the future, such as might have come to the mind of an older and more sophisticated woman, and she realized that Kerry would be keenly unhappy if she left him in uncertainty.

"If it is yours, why should you repudiate it now?" she queried with an innocent boldness that won immediate response. His eyes fixed upon her with a yearning and intensity that made her afraid.

"Is it mine?" his voice was changed and husky, and Laura, frightened, gave back only silence.

"Laura—Heavens, girl, come to me—unless you have been torturing me wantonly!"

Her hand was at her throat where the pulses leaped wildly, and her eyes sought a way of

escape. Once again he spoke, imploring desperately—

“Oh, my dear, I love you—have you nothing to say to me?”

She ran to him and kneeled by his chair, taking his big hands in hers and laying one against each of her soft cheeks.

“Dear me, Kerry,” she murmured with a sigh of content, “I was afraid you were never going to say it!”

CHAPTER XV

A SWEETHEART THIRTY YEARS AGO

L AURA did not keep any secrets from her mother after all. She poured out her whole confidence, with rosy dreams and youthful hopes, while the mother's heart sank accordingly. She wanted her girl to be happy—but what prospect of happiness had she if she joined her life to that of a penniless cripple? Mrs. West had a modest annuity, which would expire when she did. Laura had her education, and must earn her own living; she had abilities, health and energy, and she must not be allowed to make domestic shipwreck of her little argosy. Her mother questioned closely, and was not long in satisfying herself that Kerry was a man in every essential of manliness save only for physical perfection. And she, too, began to plan that this might be accomplished as well.

"I will tell John about it," she said thoughtfully. "It is a pity Mrs. McCoy could not break through her rigid pride to call in a doctor now. People are not often so stubbornly anxious to meet an obligation!"

"I think she would, mother, only she is afraid Kerry—" and the pink ran into her cheeks—"Kerry might get the idea she had grown weary

of working for him, don't you see?"

"And he won't urge it for fear she might get the idea he had grown weary of waiting upon her slow efforts! What a pair! Meanwhile the boy is wasting his best years—and going to waste yours too, my daughter!" She bent a keen glance upon the girl.

They were sitting in the little sewing-room where Laura had received her sisters at Easter. Then she had been a child—now she was a woman, tasting life and love with the child's zest and eagerness, but appreciating it with the maturity that comes through sacrifice.

"He is worthy of the best of me—" she answered simply, and her mother, looking upon her radiant youthfulness, forbore to mention the practical everyday view of the case. Laura would see that herself in time—would see that life demanded dollars and cents, and it is the man's place to provide these or feel forever humiliated. She had an idea that Kerry would not permit his wife to be the bread-winner, and saw only sorrow ahead for both. She did not quite believe that any miracle of surgery could altogether restore him, although she hoped it might be possible.

"I must see what John says," she said again. "If they only had a grandfather's clock or something like that—family jewelry or anything that would bring in money—of course one dare not offer them anything—"

Laura shook her head; there was no grandfather's clock in the old log house—and where would Anne McCoy get family jewels? Or what

would she do with them if she did have them? In a vision she saw again the prim little room, and almost laughed at the incongruity of such pomp in association with the rag rugs, the crocheted tidy on the organ stool, the old box stove and the quaint dim pictures on the wall—

Wait! Was there any significance in the name scrawled upon the exquisite picture of Mrs. McCoy with her baby in her arms? The tremendous possibility dawned upon her so wonderfully that she was fairly dazed. Maybe, oh maybe the picture would be the way out! Eagerly, incoherently, she poured out her new hope to her mother, who looked dubious at first, and at last allowed herself to be persuaded that it was worth investigating.

Mrs. West took her old friend, Dr. John Gregory, into her confidence, and he proceeded to quiz Laura unmercifully. He was on one of his rare vacations from his exacting profession and made use of a room or two in Mrs. West's wide spread house. He had his own entrance, and usually got his meals at the hotel as his hours were most irregular. He slept the greater part of the time, in fact! To this quiet nook he came when he began to feel jaded, and here he slept himself back to the poise that is necessary to a great surgeon.

He awakened long enough, however, to find out what his little Laura had been doing in the back woods, as he put it.

She described to him the case of Benaiah Abercrombie, and her own share in it. He took hold of her paternally by the firm wrist and looked

closely at the long slender hand, strong and shapely.

"Aha!" he cried triumphantly. "A nurse—here it is in your life-line! And see—the line of the heart—yes, now let me see what there is in this line of the heart! Red hair—tiddley winks, girl, don't tell me I see an Irishman—or is it—aha! A Scotchman, as I live!"

She snatched her hand away indignantly, with much color in her face. "How can you be so ridiculous! You are Irish yourself, but you haven't red hair!" She preferred to evade the Scotch side of it.

"That's the deuce of it—no hair at all—and so I lose the custom of all the bald headed people!" he rubbed his hand ruefully over his head where indeed the fair hair was sparse and bristly. "I'm young yet—and beautiful too, as long as you don't look at my head. But why do you snatch away your hand? Can't you let a nice young man like me hold it awhile?"

"All rights reserved," she retorted gayly, and suddenly his manner changed.

"Tell me about this north-country hero, child. How did he get hurt?"

She told the simple story of the log skids, the treacherous cant-hook and the sudden catastrophe, with its inevitable pain and helplessness in train.

"But why didn't the doctor fix him up then? Why let it go? Who was the doctor, anyway?"

"It was old Dr. Higgs and it seems he was suffering then from hardening of the walls of the arteries, or whatever you call it, and was neglecting his business dreadfully. He knew enough

to know he couldn't do it, and he just let the chance pass."

He nodded in comprehension. That sort of thing was possible on the outskirts of medical activity, but it entailed suffering for those unfortunates who fell into the incapable hands."

"Can he stand, or move himself about?" he asked presently, but Laura shook her head in confusion.

"I don't know!"

"Don't know—Great Scott! How did he ever propose if he didn't go down on his knees?"

"I went down on mine—" she laughed shyly. "I thought that would do as well. But I think he must be able to stand, a little anyway, for he is big—I'm sure his mother couldn't lift all his weight."

Again he nodded, being wiser than she in the things that mothers can do.

"Say, what will you give me if I go and mend up this damaged idol of yours? Take a good look at me and say what it's worth!"

She raised brave eyes to his face, with confident, eager trust, so that he almost forgot to tease her, for the sake of the implicit faith she showed.

"I have nothing that I would not give you," she answered in her straightforward fashion. "You know that."

Her mother's old and valued friend leaned forward and took her hand again. "I'd like this!" he said calmly—and when she gathered his meaning, she lifted herself scornfully, so that he rejoiced to see her.

"You are a great surgeon, and you may have it—if you take it off at the wrist! But I'd rather marry Kerry, crippled as he is, than be the wife of any one else, even—"

"Ha, Ha!" his big laugh boomed through the air, and he snatched her hand again. "Ripty—Dip! I thought you were cut out for a nurse, but it is the stage I meant! Do that again for me, won't you?"

Discomforted and embarrassed, she watched him as he ceased to laugh, and yawned comfortably behind his wonderful hand. "Come along, child," he said cheerfully. "I'll take a run up to look at your prodigy when I go to see about that case in Walkerton, but to tell you the truth, I don't believe there's much wrong with him! The lazy young dog doesn't need to sit around idly just because he bruised his back two years ago!"

"Uncle Gregory!" said the shocked voice, but he only laughed again.

"Dearest Laura!" he mocked her—"Oh, he knew how to play on your sympathies all right! I'm of the opinion there's dashed little wrong with him. Doctor what-you-may-call'm tells him he has tied a knot in his backbone and mustn't walk, and so he never even tries! Now he has lost the use of his despised legs and I'm asked to ring in a miracle and build a new foundation under him. Hmph! If the house got on fire some night, I'll bet he could manage to scramble out."

But Laura's face had grown so white with apprehension at this idea, that he repented. "Well, we may be thankful if I have guessed aright," he said, and she knew by his changed

tone that he was quite serious. "It will easier for everybody if the trouble is more imaginary than real."

It was July. The little inland town reeled in the heat. Only the main streets were watered and elsewhere the floury white dust rose like a cloud after every passing vehicle. Mrs. West in other years had gone to Muskoka, where Julia's big house had welcomed her. This summer she did not go. She lacked energy to prepare for the trip. She was beginning to regard herself as an old woman.

"When Laura marries and settles down, my work will be done," she had said wearily to John Gregory, and he had responded somewhat disconcertingly:

"Not a bit of it! You must help to raise your grandchildren, when your own children are off your hands!"

She shook her head smiling. Her grandchildren—the idea!

He promised Laura that he would let her know the result of his examination of Kerry, stipulating that she must send no warning of his intended visit. So she waited, hopefully, with what patience she could command.

Meanwhile she wrote occasionally to Kerry—shy little notes that told as much by what they left out as by what they actually said. And Dr. John Gregory headed for the north to his case in Walkerton. Then he turned his car into the highways and byways, where startled and wondering natives came out to see him pass. Cars were rare novelties there in those days. At

last the road brought him out to a little clearance, where the vision of tumbling waters in the July sun, was framed and striped by tall, slender trees, white and graceful. The little islands against the horizon, no less than the great throne-like boulder in the foreground, told him that he had found Laura's beloved Indian Clearance. Therefore he turned inland along the narrow corduroy road through the cedar swamp, and presently emerged in front of the little school. When he thought of the girl's serious remarks about her "Work" and her "school," her "time-table," and her "children" he was moved to laughter. "Please Teacher, can I get a drink?" he said mockingly to himself. "I suppose they say that yet, just the same as when I was a boy!"

Presently he saw the house low-lying in the heat, and some tug of long-forgotten homesickness dragged at his heart. Few men of middle years can view unmoved the sight of a substantial log house with swaying lilacs and encircling orchard—it speaks so potently of home; and in just such a home John Gregory had spent many years. His thoughts raced back to those far off days, and the girl who reigned then in his heart as she reigned still. He had left the simple, unpretentious home of his boyhood at the call of the man who gave him education and opportunity. When he had established himself in his profession his desires turned back to the girl he loved. But no man may have everything, and she was not for him. Now at fifty, his memories of her were sweet and clear. She was still to him the one woman, recalled by the magic of the old

log house. . . . An irrepressible yawn took him in the midst of his dreams.

"Dash take it—this yawning is getting to be a regular disease," he muttered. "I'll be yawning at the undertaker when he comes to get me one of these days!"

He walked slowly down the path through the orchard, and presently he rapped modestly upon the seldom-used front door. No answer. Mrs. McCoy and Francie were loading hay in the ten-aere field, and the great surgeon had the unusual experience of finding a door that did not open to him. He therefore turned to the verandah and mounted to the kitchen door. The screen was closed but the inner door was open and when a quiet voice bade him enter, he knew at once that it was Kerry.

"How do you do?" he said in his genial way, while his keen eyes scanned the boy's fine, high-bred face. "You are Mr. Kerry McCoy, I believe? I have come on business with—your mother."

Kerry acknowledged the question, wondering what in the world the business might be. He saw his mother coming, for the fact that an automobile had halted at the gate was far more important than a load of hay! So he spoke with his usual grave courtesy

"If you will be good enough to go into the other room, my mother will come to you without delay," he said, and John Gregory, puzzled by some elusive quality in voice and expression, opened the door and entered the room. Facing him upon the drab wall with its faded paper,

was the markable picture.

He stared—advanced, and stared again, while dignity fled and his mouth fell open helplessly, incredulously. The sea-blue eyes, the lovely curling hair, the wide, kindly, humorous smile—it was Anne—it was Anne! He stood and gazed hungrily upon it while the years of separation rolled away like a dream; he saw only his sweetheart, of nearly thirty years ago!

He dropped into a chair, not daring to believe, yet refusing to doubt, and his eyes clung to the painting as though he feared to lose it. Presently he began to reconstruct matters, and to wonder exceedingly. How had the picture come here? What connection had his Anne with this place? Anne McCoy—that was the woman's name—could she be—was it possible—! A hundred broken conjectures jostled in his mind as he feasted his eyes upon the beautiful face.

He got up and walked over to it. The brave blue eyes laughed at him but there was a sign to him in them and in the mouth that she had suffered too. "But you look happy—you and your baby!" he mused tenderly.

The door clicked behind him, and he whirled consciously, to find Mrs. McCoy standing with calm face, waiting for him. In the few moments at her disposal, she had washed her face and hands, and slipped on a simple, much washed dress of black-and-white print. Her face was flushed with the heat, and somewhat weary, for loading hay is hard work. She had not attempted to smooth her hair; that was a substantial task. Therefore the little heat curls lay damp about

her temples, and twisted delicately at the back of her neck. Much to be envied is a woman with such hair.

Worn as she was, Gregory saw nothing but her immortal eyes, blue, kindly and unfaltering. He stepped towards her with out-stretched hands.

"Anne—Oh, Anne! Have I found you at last!"

She stared at him in blank silence, a puzzled line coming between her brows. The voice was the voice of the alert, eager stripling of more than a quarter of a century past; but this plump little man, chubby-faced and slightly bald, had no place in her consciousness.

"Wull ye no sit?" she asked courteously, while she endeavored to gain a little time for consideration of his words. The room, somewhat darkened for the sake of coolness, was yet light enough for her to study his face, and she bent a keen scrutiny upon him. He sat down excitedly, drawing an elaborate "tidy" with him.

"It's Limpin' Jock Gregory's Jock, is't no?" she said quietly, without a sign that she had once loved him passionately, until, believing herself discarded, she had contrived to hate him with a fury as great as ever her love had been. "Ay, I mind ye noo. I didna think ye wad be as stout—but maybes ye hanna the wark would keep doon flesh."

He winced—for this was a very sensitive point, as it is with most gentlemen over the half century who have achieved a "contour." She had meant to hurt him, and now, having succeeded, she felt more kindly towards him. They sat in silence facing each other, full of memories sweet

and painful, yet afraid to cross the gulf made by years of separation. Presently he burst forth in passionate reproach:

"Oh, Anne, could you not have waited for me that little while? See, I have waited—yes, all these years!"

She shrank back as though he had opened an old wound.

"An' hoo think ye wad I wait, seein' ye spoke me no word o' waitin'? Ye went wi'oot farewell, an' ye stayed wi'oot explanation. I hae pride eneuch that I'll no be mocked by ony man!" Her rich voice was husky with remembered pain, and shook a little as though she implied much more than she actually said.

"But, Anne—my letter—" he protested earnestly. "I sent you a letter the night I got Uncle George's telegram. I sent you a letter in my copy of Robert Burns' poems before I took the train. I had only an hour, but I wrote to you and put it in the book. Bob McCready took it for me. I gave him a quarter and he promised to see that you got it."

She made a little sound, almost a moan, and the color faded from her face as she realized the ghastly joke of Fate. How could she have guessed that there was a letter in the old book of poems? Yet now, with wider knowledge to illumine the circumstances, how was it that she had never thought of it? What blindness!

"But my faither—oh, he pit it intae the fire! He mocked at me, that ye had coorted me twa year, and then ye went awa' an' left me nocht but a wheen poetry for a keepsake. He said,

'Mark my words, lass: he's gone, an' he'll neither come back to ye nor send ye word. I ken they lads.' Gin I had had the letter, I cud ha' tholed it. But there was never ony signs o' ye. . . . It wis maybes a guid thing. Here ye are famous an' wealthy. An ignorant Scotch lass like me wad ha' held ye doon sairly."

The lift of her head and the fire in her eye bespoke a pride in herself altogether out of keeping with her humble words. She was not a woman to be lightly scorned. His eager gaze fastened upon her with admiration, almost boyishly pathetic. He shook his head a little at her last words.

"No, Anne. No man could go so high that you would not be just a little bit higher. I went to Uncle George that night after I sent you the book. He put me through college and practically gave me all that I have. He asked me to leave all thoughts of love and marrying until I had something definitely accomplished. So I did not write, for somehow I thought you would understand. At last, when I came back to this side of the water, you were married and away, and I never went back to the village. I never even asked the name of the man you married!"

They sat in a deep silence, adjusting themselves to the extraordinary circumstances. She was conscious of a great uprush of pity for herself as well as for him. Presently he came over and drew up a chair beside her. He lifted her hand by the wrist as he had done with Laura's, but this time there was neither thought nor suggestion of raillery. The blood shot to his temples as he

bserved the roughened, calloused plam, the fingers discolored by the peeling of vegetables, scarred by old burns of ironing days, and baking days, darkened by sun and wind—such hands as hundreds of women hurry through countless tasks until the quiet day when they fold them in peace forever. He felt guilty, and hardly dared to look at her.

She lay back in her big old-fashioned chair, with her head resting against the faded velvet. She was very tired, and her hand lay passive in his. He had quite forgotten Kerry—and so, it must be confessed, had she.

“Anne,” he said gently, pleadingly, “I’ve been lonely all these years. There has been no other woman—I’ve never had a home. I lost you once through waiting until I had a home to offer you, and now—I haven’t much more even now than the ability to earn. Will you come to me, dear, and look after me? You know I love you.”

“Me—” she mocked him, but there was tenderness in her eyes. “Folk wad laugh ta think o’ great Dr. Gregory wi’ an unlearned Scotchwoman to be his wife! There’ll be mony o’ they rich weemen in toon wull tak’ ye—an’ yer money. Think na mair o’ me!” Yet she did not say it quite as if she meant him to do it, and his hopes mounted.

“To tell you the truth, dear, I haven’t very much money. Of course I perform a good many operations, but I never send in a bill. If people are honest, they settle with me—if they can. If they are not honest, I don’t want their money under any circumstances. You see, I had no one

but myself to provide for, and I have always had enough for anything I needed. I hate the book-keeping part of the profession, and I just did without it. So if you turn me over to the city ladies I won't get a very kind reception. . . But there," said the little man with a sigh, "I have no right to ask you to share my—busy, unsatisfactory life."

In through the open window came the jangle of a cow-bell. Francie, despairing of any further progress at the haying, had taken a comfortable little nap and then brought up the cows. It was the call of the old life—John's pathetic sigh was the breath of the new. He needed her—a very strong argument with Anne McCoy: and she was utterly weary of the unequal struggle. She had been carrying on, which was another good reason for turning her back on it. But behind all that was the undying love of her girlhood, which had lain hidden all these years, growing with her own development from the ormantic illusions of youth to the steady affection of maturity, based upon respect and congeniality. She had not loved Michael—but she had given him true esteem and honest comradeship. Perhaps if he had lived longer their domestic serenity might have suffered, but as it was, she felt no self-reproach. Her resentment over John Gregory's treatment for her had helped her through those years, too.

"I cudna mairry ye, gin ye war rich, Jock. I wadna want ye to be ashamed o' me an' my Scotch tongue—" she spoke slowly, considering many things. He laughed, suddenly joyous.

"Bless your dear heart—you will be all the

style—in a week. Scotch words will be as fashionable as feathers in hats! As for being ashamed of you—surely you wouldn't be ashamed of me for being—bald, would you? Or for being a little—well, fleshy?" He asked the question with some anxiety; she swept him with an appraising glance.

"Ye were aye fair, wi' awfu' fine hair, an' ye hae a guid lot o't yet, but it disna show. As for bein' stout, I must say I like a man ta be aboot your build, wi' comfortable flesh on his bones. Thae thin racks o' men are nae credit tae the cook. Losh! Ye'll be fair starved. Cud ye taste—?"

"Nothing, Anne, until you make the supper. I'm going to overhaul this boy of yours and see what's wrong, if possible.'

So there was an end of intimate talk just then. They had a certain sense of strangeness to overcome, and the situation required an adjustment of ideas, which to her, at least, was slow and uncertain. She had cherished a long-abiding anger against him which had hidden her love even from herself, as ashes hide the living coals. It was therefore something of a relief to both that they could turn to Kerry, and lose their embarrassment in the common interest.

CHAPTER XVI

A NEW ORDER OF THINGS

KERRY accepted the new order of things with characteristic gravity. He liked Dr. Gregory instinctively, and when the situation had been somewhat explained to him he was inclined to like him even better. His regard was perhaps influenced by the fact that the surgeon's skill meant a great deal to him; he thrilled with a little natural dread as he submitted to the examination in his old familiar bedroom, which now began to wear the face of a departing friend. Hours he had spent there, fretting, hoping, despairing, but he knew that a chance of some sort was at hand.

Anne McCoy, between trips to cellar and pantry, found herself standing and listening with bated breath as she came opposite the bedroom for what? She knew there would be no outcry—but the silence or low-toned words seemed equally ominous. She could not think of the things needed for supper; mechanically she set forth her few fine old china plates with the little grooved cups and transparent saucers. She had no knives and forks but the common metal ones with their black handles, yet she found a fine white table napkin for the doctor. There was only a platter

of roasted lake trout, cold from dinner time; some lettuce and onions from her little garden; a bowl of fried potatoes; home baked bread and a mould of yellow butter like a pool of sunlight, with the print go the acorns and oak leaves firm upon it; in the centre of the table stood a shallow glass dish such as fruit is served in, and a few purple pansies leaned over the ornate edge. Pansies! It was characteristic of this woman that she planted pansies rather than sunflowers wherever she went, in whatever circumstances she might find herself, she would somehow manage to have the refinement of flowers, however few or humble.

She had neither pie nor cake—a sore grief to her on this great occasion. Haymaking does not agree with fine cookery when both must be done by the same pair of hands. Moreover for Kerry's sake, she was sparing of the fire in this sultry weather. When she had done all that was to be done, she set the teapot towards the back of the stove and put the potatoes to keep warm. Then because she was very human, she walked over to the little washstand, where there was a comb and brush, and she took them out to the verandah with her. The few hair pins went into the pocket of her apron, and the loosened shining masses of beautiful hair hung heavily about her. She brushed it to a silky smoothness, glad that it was still so luxuriant as when he had admired it years before—and blushed at herself for the thought: When the thick braid was once more woven, she wound it in a great brown coil at the back of her head and put away the comb and brush.

The door opened quietly and the doctor came out.

"We'll give the boy his supper in bed, eh?" he said casually. "Perhaps he is a bit tired. Then I'm going to tell you all about it, Anne, while we have a little ride in that car of mine."

"But the coos hae ta be milked," she began apprehensively. He stepped over to her with determination, and although he always gave the impression of being a small man, he was able to look down masterfully into her eyes. He lifted one of her brown, weary hands. "Please God," he said gently and reverently, "These hands are done with heavy work. If Francie can't milk a cow, I can—no more of that work for you. You have Kerry and me to look after now, and Kerry will need you very much presently."

Francie had declined to come in for supper with such exalted company. His overalls and dark steamy shirt would dine alone afterwards, when he might without restraint stab his fork into anything he desired. Therefore they had the big kitchen to themselves. The north door was open and the mellow evening sunlight lay along the floor. The unfailing breeze of sunset was awaking upon the lake, and already the air was cooler and fresher. Kerry's voice came from the bedroom as his mother stood, undecided, at the door with Dr. Gregory still holding her firmly by the hands.

"Mother," he said quietly in his controlled voice, "I want you to do whatever Dr. Gregory asks you to do. I quite agree with his attitude

in all that concerns you."

So he gave her to understand which way his sympathies lay, yet left her free to decide for herself. The doctor drew her towards the table.

"Come on, Anne. I'm as hungry as a little bear. Let's eat first, and worry afterwards if you want to—although one never feels as much like worrying after meals. Glory—do you have a spread like this very often?" he went on with cheerful informality, tucking the corner of his table napkin inside his collar—which was a failing he had never conquered. "I've lived in boarding houses, and roomed in hotels until I don't know how to behave in front of a decent home-made meal. Lately I've lived in my own house, and keep a house-keeper to run it for me, but—oh, Anne!"

He spread his hands eloquently, so that she quite understood the terrible state of affairs in his neglected home, and her heart yearned over him. He chattered joyously while the meal was in progress, helping her to forget her restraint and feel absolutely at ease with him. Then he left her to get Kerry's tray ready, while he sought out Francie, whom he already knew from Laura's description.

The worthy Scotchman had put the cows into the stable to be milked. He had his team unharnessed, watered, and munching upon their evening oats. And he now sat upon a hickory block which stood always by the water-trough. He was reduced to a very small portion of tobacco, for there would be no more until the mail carrier came—and it might be that he would forget it, being, in Francie's opinion, a poor useless fellow.

His back was toward the house, so that he did not see the doctor coming, yet he knew as soon as he heard the voice that it must be the man who owned the car.

"Good evening," said the doctor cheerfully. "This must be Mr. McAllister, I take it? My name is John Gregory, and I have been examining young Mr. McCoy's back."

Francie emitted a short grunt which might have meant anything, and the doctor made a fresh start by passing over a couple of cigars.

"Try these, and tell me how you like them," he said thoughtfully, knowing that to a smoker who is facing a tobacco famine, cigars are bribery of the most tempting kind. Francie's countenance and the small portion of pipe-material which he held in his hand had told the tale to those observant eyes. "As man to man," he went on, "I want to ask your advice. That young fellow has to go to Toronto for an operation; his mother will go with him. They may never come back. Now what about the place?"

This was news with a vengeance. Francie carefully pocketed one cigar and his cherished bit of "plug," so that they might not come to grief while he assimilated this astounding information.

"My certes!" he ejaculated helplessly. "My certes—that's news!"

"Is there anybody who would help you to work the place this year, until we see what is to be done? Would any of the neighbors buy the cattle, do you suppose?" went on the doctor encouragingly. Francie saw a great light.

"Ay—young Ben Harris micht wark it wi'

me—he cud board richt to his ain place. Auld Ben nicht tak' the cattle—him or John Cowie. I wad willingly stay here masel'. She cud close up the hoose only what I wad need. Ech, sirs, gin she's for gaun awa', dinna lat her stop for me. I'll dae my best wi' her—she wis guid eneuch wi' me—by times, ye ken," he added hastily, for it was not in his nature to wax enthusiastic—and he was not fond of ginger tea.

The doctor felt very cheerful as he returned to the house presently. He knew pretty well what he was going to do, and it was pleasant to think of. Francie followed, being quite ready for his supper. Then in the golden glow of a July evening, John Gregory helped a quiet woman into his little car. He turned it to face the sunset, for the magic of this wild place was entering into his heart. They slid easily away down the smooth sandy road, and for the first time she felt the swinging, bird-like motion of an automobile. He was the one to speak and his words were prosaically commonplace.

"Where does Auld Ben Harris live, Anne?"

She indicated the small frame house, and the wide gateway which opened upon the stable yard, and he took it with a curve that made her catch her breath. Mr. Harris, feeding his calves by turns from a battered and very sour pail, wiped his hands elegantly upon his much worn overalls and swung towards them, as loose and ungainly as ever.

"Introduce me, Anne," whispered her companion, and with some embarrassment she did so. This formality over he plunged at once into

business.

"Mrs. McCoy and her son are going to Toronto very shortly," he explained, and as Anne started protestingly he laid his hand quietly over hers, "where the young man expects to undergo an operation."

"My Gosh," ejaculated Mr. Harris blankly, as the doctor paused a moment. "That'll cost a pile o' money!"

"Fortunately she has no need to worry about the money," replied the other suavely, realizing that in this part of the world a woman of wealth might receive somewhat better treatment than a penniless widow—for he had found such to be the case elsewhere, and rather suspected it was a universal failing. "Now Mr. Harris, you have a son?"

"Yep—and seven daughters!" he responded promptly with a wave of his long arm which seemed to indicate that they were all at the lady's disposal.

"I congratulate you—I do indeed!"

"Ye needn't—if ye knowed what it cost to raise 'em, an' school 'em—girls take such a pile o' clothes! An' now there's young fellas courtin' 'em an' so they're no good for housework. Any man 'at's got more'n two, had oughta have a bounty from the Gove'ment for every extra one!"

The doctor beamed upon him joyously. "You and I must have a good long talk, Mr. Harris, when I have more leisure. Meanwhile, let one of your girls go over to Mrs. McCoy's house now and do the milking and whatever else has to be done. I want to hire your boy to help Francie

take off the hay and harvest. Now what about it?"

The breath rattled in Mr. Harris' throat; he swelled visibly with importance. *His* son, *his* daughter—of course they would do anything. In the matter of wages he was somewhat cautious, but the doctor had a reputation for getting his own way, and in this case he was successful as usual. Mr. Harris somehow found himself eager to possess Mrs. McCoy's cows and young cattle, and worked himself up to the pitch of offering a price that was almost reasonable. When this and a few other minor details had been arranged, the car slid out of the gate again, away from the noisome stable yard, and down the long white road to the lake. Dusk was gathering now; the bats flew undisturbed about the shadowy school yard. The little moon hung forlornly above the lake, pale in the afterglow of the sun. The random breeze swept like a waving fan across the fretted water, and all the world was mellow with summer. He cast a look at her.

"Well, did I sell your stuff to good advantage?"

"Nae wunner ye're poor," she retorted with a flash of malice, "gin ye are as open-handed wi' yer ain gear! But ye done weel. eneuch—I'd ha' been a week barterin' wi' him afore he wad ha' agreed to ony terms. But ye sudna ha' told him yon lee aboot money. I ha' naethin', ye ken, John—I ha' naethin' but ma ain wee things aboot the place, and it is mine and Kerry's—equals."

"It was no lie, dear. You will not need to worry about the price of a cow—how much is it?

Thirty dollars—forty? Your only worry will be your men folks—after I get you to Toronto. I'm going back in the morning to get things ready for Kerry. I want the X-rays on that back off his, and I'm going to bring him down to Toronto where I can keep an eye on him. If there's no other way of doing, I'll bring a private motor ambulance for him, and you, my dear, are going to be Mrs. John Gregory just as fast as I can get a ring and a license and a minister and you assembled together—and me, of course. You see—I can't operate on him here—no supplies, telephone, equipment or anything. Leave it to me, will you, Anne?"

He had stopped the car upon the edge of the clearance, and leaned forward in his seat to look into her face. The gathering darkness obscured the lines graved by time and care. Nothing could alter her lovely eyes, and they met his bravely, but she spoke no word.

"Anne," he said a little huskily, for he was tremendously in earnest, "I've been all these years without any love-making. Often I've dreamed about you—and me—in the twilight together; but the dream has faded and left me always lonelier than ever. Would you—could you put your head down on my shoulder, Anne? And in all the time I courted you, you never once kised me!"

Tears rushed to her eyes, and an uncontrollable sob was in her throat. "I think I ha' needed ye waur on ever ye needed me!" she whispered and laid her tired arms about his neck, thanking God in her heart for the enduring love that had stood

the test of time and separation.

They were not particularly demonstrative, these middle-aged lovers. They were very quiet as they turned back again along the silent road. "You will have to learn to run this," he told her as they moved easily along, and was amused at her consternation. "You'll have to run down to the hospital every day to see your boy, and to bring me home occasionally. It isn't good for my hands to run it much. As soon as Kerry gets well enough, he will pick it up, no doubt."

She had never asked him a word about the boy! Nevertheless, from his manner, and his apparent serenity she had gathered great assurance—she did not need to ask. One thing troubled her, greatly—yet she could not speak to him about it. She had—as all women declare unfailingly in every emergency—absolutely nothing to wear! Her involuntary glance at the faded dress and coarse shoes when he spoke of a speedy marriage, had not escaped the observant doctor. He had learned to watch for symptoms, and he had found too that a new dress is sometimes better medicine than anything with a Latin name and a bitter taste. He chuckled to himself with delight. He had never had a woman to buy clothes for—therefore the prospect filled him with naive pleasure.

Francie was always a somewhat strenuous companion and now the weight of the doctor's extraordinary news was heavy upon his soul. His affection for Kerry assumed unforeseen proportions, and caused him great discomfort. The boy's father had been almost the only friend of the

eccentric little Scotchman, and he did not forget. How he wished he had some keepsake to give the boy—something to remind him of auld Francie! He cast about in his mind, but alas, he had nothing beyond his shabby clothes, his old pipe—and Jakie! A twinge rent him at the thought of parting with his cherished Jakie—to be succeeded by the comfortable reflection that Kerry and the dog were intolerable to each other. He need not give up his darling—there was surely some other parting gift to be thought of.

Kerry, lying absorbed in thought in the gathering dusk of his room, paid little attention to the mutterings of the old Scotchman. He was thoroughly dissatisfied with himself and his passive attitude—his helpless acceptance of circumstances. When he thought of Laura, shame covered him that he had ever allowed himself to speak of love. The nearing possibility of regaining his health made him wish that he had waited—yet the memory of her as he had held her in his arms swept over him in an overmastering rush of delight. He was glad he had not waited.

“What’s the use of tormenting myself?” he pondered at length in the twilight. “I love her—she loves me. In a few weeks or months I may be well and strong—as I have longed to be. But I want to do something myself—I can’t bear this passiveness; it’s not natural. It makes me restless. . . . Well, no doubt there will be action enough when I’m on my feet again.”

In the midst of his musings, he was aware of a voice at his door.

“Who’s there?”

"It's auld Francie. Are ye wakin'?"

Kerry replied, somewhat unnecessarily, that he was indeed awake, and invited Francie to enter and be seated. There followed a heavy masculine pause which inevitably occurs where small-talk is unknown. Then Francie cleared his throat.

"Ye're for awa', they tell me."

"Yes."

"It's an awfu' far cry, T'ronto. A sinfu' place—ay. They tell me—" and he lieked his lips—"there's eneuch gude whuskey drank there ilka day ta float a schooner."

"Is that so?" said Kerry with a smile. "Don't fret about me, Francie. I'll write and let you know how I get along. I had a long talk with Dr. Gregory to-day. He thinks he can fix me up to be as good a man as I ever was. Then I'll come back—and work the farm myself."

"Ay—come back, lad. Dinna forget the auld place when ye're doon amang city streets an' fine folk. Ha' mind o' them 'at loves ye, here—"

Kerry's hand went out and patted the drawn and meagre shoulder beside him.

"I'm not the kind that forgets. This has been my home—is my home. I can be as big a man here as anywhere—if it's in me at all." He said it more to himself than to the old man, but Francie replied eagerly—

"Ay—if a man's ony guid he can prove it on a farm. If he's only a worthless eallant, the black soil shows it up quicker nor ony ither thing. But noo, ye're gaun, an' I've a wee bit keepsake for ye. I made it masel'—squeezed the berries atween ma twa hands—it's guid—oh

mon, it's guid. A wee drap o' it, whiles, puts stren'th inta ye. Tak it, tak it. Ye're welcome!"

He thrust upon him a grimy black flask, of elderberry wine, and Kerry was moved to a great rush of gratitude. What if the old hands were hard, calloused, smudgy, and saturated with nicotine? Such a gift from Francie meant very much—it meant that he parted with a thing he loved dearly himself, which is, after all, the rarest sort of gift. Kerry held it gratefully in his hand.

"Thank you, Francie. I know how to appreciate this. When I look at it, I'll remember always the hands that made it, and the kind heart that thought of giving it to me. We've had good times together, haven't we?" he went on, bridging the awkwardness that sometimes embarrasses such situations.

"Ay. D'ye mind the time you an' me went sucker-fishin'?"

He broke off sharply, as a loud metallic clatter announced the presence of some one at the back door with the milk pails.

"Gosh! Wha might be yon?" he ejaculated, hastening forth to investigate. It was Mary Maude Ellen Harris, with the evening's milk. He let her in and then went sulkily to his place behind the stove where Jakie had been waiting for him. The dog had sense enough to stay out of Kerry's room.

Mary Maude Elleu knew the ways of the house; she had helped Mrs. McCoy occasionally during the time immediately following Kerry's accident. Since then she had been at service in the city, and quite condescended in her manner

towards old friends. She moved quietly and competently about the house, and when the two older people returned, everything was in its accustomed place, and on the surface all seemed to be as usual.

CHAPTER XVII

THE VALLEY OF SHADOW

THERE was excitement in the West home when these things became known. Laura and her mother rejoiced exceedingly over the old-fashioned romance of Dr. Gregory and the sweetheart of his youth.

"I don't know when I've heard anything so delightfully quaint and interesting," said Mrs. West, folding up the doctor's letter and returning it to its envelope. Laura thoughtfully threaded her needle. She was engaged on a task she thoroughly disliked—that of mending and patching all her garments, for her salary did not permit her to be extravagant in any line. She had to make as much as possible of what she had, keeping everything in repair. Her mother insisted on this, and the girl's own instinctive daintiness demanded it; yet she disliked the labor involved in renewing old or half-worn articles. It would have been easier and pleasanter to make new ones.

"I wonder," she began, and then hesitated. Even to her mother it was not easy to say what she felt. "I wonder—what difference this will make—to Kerry!"

"How?"

"He has never been much away from Andrews' Bay. What a change it will be to meet people, and live in a city, after that quiet place!"

"Are you afraid his sentiments will change with his circumstances?" asked Mrs. West, watching the telltale color leap to the girl's brow.

"No-o, I just—wondered—" Laura said slowly, with some confusion.

"There is no actual engagement between you—nothing definite? Nothing beyond a little—a few—"

"That is all," Laura supplied with haste. "We did not say much. There seemed no need of it."

No need of it, indeed! Youth realizes love, but sees marriage as only a vague something in the distance. It had never been mentioned between Laura and Kerry—but to the girl, it was implied in the broken words and hungry lips of her lover. She shrank a little from confessing the mission; it had seemed so unimportant until her mother's question revealed it.

"He is not bound then, in any way, except by his feelings—"

"And by his honor!"

"Oh yes—his honor!" repeated Mrs. West, visibly unimpressed. What would a raw backwoods boy know of honor? "It stands to reason that when he is well again—as he soon will be if Dr. Gregory takes him in hand—his whole outlook on life will alter. Sick men always fall in love with their nurses; they promptly fall out again when they get better. He has never seen you except with the eyes of an invalid."

Laura made no answer. She was busy sewing

on a patch that she could not even see. A mist was before her eyes. Her mother knew what was best and wisest, of course. No doubt if Kerry had wanted her to marry him, he would have asked her—the blood sang in her ears at the memory of the opportunity she had innocently given him.

"You must be prepared, dear," went on her mother placidly, with the idea of making things easier for her, "You must be prepared to have him change his mind, as doubtless he will when he begins to meet other young ladies, and to find himself equal to other men in health and opportunity."

Still Laura made no answer—one cannot speak with such a cruel pain in the throat.

"It might be as well then, to wait until he makes further advances—you would have nothing to regret—no sacrifices of your own dignity and modesty—"

There was a crash, as Laura's chair overturned with the impetus of her hasty uprising. The door slammed behind her, and her unsteady feet fumbled upon the stairs. Mrs. West, mildly disturbed, gathered up the scattered spools and mending materials.

"Dear me—I hope the child isn't going to be difficult about this young man! It's only a boy-and-girl affair anyway, as far as I can see. There is plenty of time—plenty of time. If he wants her, he must be a man and come after her, and she must be content to wait until he does. Perhaps I said too much. She will have a good cry, and then it will be over and done

with."

But Laura was not crying. Safe in her own room, she sat down upon the floor, tailor fashion in front of the wide window, and stared blankly out into the dust and heat, while broken thoughts and memories whirled through her mind in dizzying confusion. Only one fact stood out. *Kerry did love her*, and the fact that he had not asked her to marry him was as nothing. His helplessness explained that. She would wait, proudly and loyally until he did. If in the meantime he found some one else, or otherwise altered in his feelings, she would know it by his letters, and would give him a sisterly benediction and speed him on his way. The sickening feeling that she had in a measure hurled herself at his head, she resolutely put away. "Dignity and modesty—" her mother had said. Well, she had both, and she would see that he had no excuse for imagining otherwise.

She took out his letters and re-read them—brief, whimsical, personal little notes which had seemed to bring him very close; now in the light of her mother's words, she saw that there was in them no expression or implication of love for her—although if she had only known, poor child, love needs no words to speak with. She had felt *Kerry* in every phrase when the letters first came; now they seemed dead and meaningless.

Somewhere a clock struck the hour. Her mother was bustling about downstairs. With a heavy sigh she rose and laid away the closely written pages in the drawer of her little desk. She *knew* *Kerry* loved her—yet deep in her mind

lay the Doubt. She *knew* that he would not change—yet could not suppress the Fear. Her mother, with the best of intentions, had darkened the sky for her.

The subject was tacitly dropped. Laura wrote to Kerry, not the shy little notes as formerly, but cheerful, brisk letters, as if she had been writing to Dr. Gregory. Any one might have read them. The boy searched them through, at first vaguely wondering; then hurt and disappointed when he failed to find what he sought. "Perhaps I have expected too much," he concluded, greatly depressed. "She has just decided to put me into my place. Maybe she is sorry that she—" He lay back and put his hand over his eyes. The poison was working in his heart too. . . .

Dr. Gregory and Mrs. McCoy were married very quietly at Andrews' Bay, and the old log house was left to the tender mercies of Francie. Anne took none of the furniture; all was left as it stood, for Kerry. Mrs. Cowie had agreed to take Laura in after the summer vacation; John Hayes was to make his headquarters at Abercrombies. Soon the grass smothered the orchard path, and bees boomed unheeded in the summer heat. An air of desolation descended with the drawn blinds and closed doors. It was a nine-days' wonder in the neighborhood and then it slipped from thought and conversation, gradually and inevitably.

Mrs. West decided that as an old friend of Dr. Gregory's it was her duty to call upon his wife. Laura made no comment, for she had none to

make. A certain Wednesday was set for the trip to the city, time tables were consulted, and the bus-driver was warned to call with his chariot in time to take her to the station for the ten-thirty train. In case she did not get home by six in the evening, Laura was to spend the night with Grace. The hand satchel was packed and set in the front hall in readiness with the silk umbrella. Mrs. West was carefully hooked into her comfortable aristocratic black silk dress. Her sweet face was framed in the plentiful grey hair. The sensible boots—last in order in her preparations—were upon her feet, waiting to be fastened.

"Where's the button-hook?" cried Laura, rattling among the manicure articles. "It must be down-stairs."

"Never mind—I can fasten them with my fingers!" said her mother as Laura dashed away to get it. Then something happened, and the blow fell for the second time with appalling suddenness. . . .

"She should never have attempted it," Grace said in a hushed, pained whisper that evening, as she sat in the little dining-room with Laura. Helen and Julia had been sent for. No one knew whether they would arrive in time, or too late. "She promised me faithfully that she would be most careful—I never dreamed that she would try to go to Toronto, or undertake such things as that!"

Laura moaned a little. "Oh, why didn't you tell me? I might have restrained her. I didn't know enough to take care of her!"

"What would have been the use of telling you?" said Grace, not meaning to be unkind. "You would only have fretted—and this was certain to come anyway, sooner or later. Poor little mother! But she may—perhaps this isn't—she has a chance, you know."

So they sat and watched the laggard fingers of the clock. A white-uniformed nurse did all that could be done for their mother. Suspense and terror held Laura, and in the hours that followed, of grief and misery, she forgot everything and everybody outside of her mother's bedroom. How could Death claim her—that mother who had been so active and cheerful always, busy about her home, and happy in her children? How could it be—yet the end was drawing nearer every moment. Helen came—and later Julia, both apprehensive and silent with fear.

On the third day a telegram came for Laura. She was in the close darkened room with her dying mother. Julia signed the book, and the messenger went quietly away. Several such messages of inquiry or sympathy had come from Mrs. West's old friends, and this was laid with the others. In the excitement and utter confusion that attends a death in the house; it was quite forgotten. Laura did not know that Kerry had come through the Valley of the Shadow to see Health and perfect Manhood within his reach. She did not know that he woke to ask for her and slept to dream of her, that he woke again to wonder and to fret and slept again to curse himself with disappointed hopes. She did not know—nor at that time would she have greatly

cared, perhaps. The human mind ceases to feel anything after a certain limit has been reached. Her whole capacity for feeling was occupied with her mother.

At last it was all over. The house was empty of people, and the strange black draped Something that was not her mother at all, had been taken away, with its load of heavy-scented flowers, to the quiet hillside where years before, her father had been laid to rest. Then Laura, eluding her sisters, slipped back to the desolate house, where it stood in the beating glare of the August afternoon. She went into the cool darkness and closed the door. She had come to say goodbye to her mother.

From room to room she slipped noiselessly, caressing with lingering fingers her mother's various treasures—books, china, pictures, music, until evening found her by her mother's low rocking chair, with her arms outspread upon it, her face buried against it.

"Mother!" she breathed desolately. And again
—"Mother!"

Almost she fancied she could feel the well-loved fingers against her hair; the grief that was bursting her heart slid out at her eyes in blinding tears. Big grey Peter crept in from somewhere and insinuated himself into the circle of her arms. She let him stay. His silent companionship helped her through that ordeal. Grief made her a woman. Julia realized it when she came anxiously seeking her.

"It is worth while, Julia," said Laura, rather brokenly. "It is worth while to try to be like

her. If I could—oh, I wish I could—”

“You are very like her now,” said Julia, gently. “There is only one thing for us to do—that is, to follow the path she loved and believed in. We can never lose her while we keep her close in love and remembrance. Some day your children will feel towards you as we have always felt towards our mother.”

Laura went suddenly white.

“Please, Julia, do not speak in that way. I only want—Mother!” She swayed a little, and put a trembling hand to her eyes.

Julia, alarmed, put her arm about the girl.

“Come, dear,” she said appealing to Laura’s sense of consideration, “Grace is waiting for us—we must not forget that she and Helen feel quite as badly as we do.”

Silently the girl obeyed, and presently the two left the house of gentle memories to take up life again numbly and forlornly, because their comforter, their friend, their mother had slipped out of their reach, and left them sorrowful.

In those days, rural schools opened for the fall term upon the third Monday in August, which fell that year as early as it possibly could. John Cowie, in deep and embarrassed sympathy, was at the station to meet Laura when she arrived, and hardly recognized the slender black-clad figure with the sad eyes. When he had arranged her on the seat of the democrat wagon, with her luggage stowed securely in the back; when the horses had clattered dustily up the stony hill from the town, and she was able to look out across the sparkling waters of the bay; when the

bush once more enfolded them and the pleasant balm o' Gileads sent out their fragrance on the heat-laden air; then came to Laura a sense of peace, even something of cheerfulness. She would be busy again, head and hands, in her chosen occupation. There would be something to keep her from thinking over what she had lost—for it seemed she had lost Kerry too.

Dr. Gregory had been at her mother's funeral, as an old friend of the family, but he had sent no word to her about the boy, and she had not asked. Kerry did not write, being handicapped for such exertions, and something had held her from writing to him. Perhaps it was a deference to her mother's words; more probably it was the sick weariness of reaction after the tension and shock of it all. She did not understand why she failed to hear from him, not knowing that the mail-carrier had slipped two of his letters under the front door of her empty, deserted home, as none of the girls had thought to notify anyone that the house was unoccupied. For Kerry wrote—painfully, awkwardly, a few words:—"Dear Heart, I'm so sorry for you. I long to comfort you—Kerry." And it would have been balm to the girl's aching soul if she had known. He wrote again, hiding his efforts from the lynx-eyed nurse, and scrawling awkwardly with half an inch of pencil. His wise, silent mother, seeing his growing uneasiness, not only posted his letters, but strove to calm him with kindly explanations of the girl's unresponsiveness. Perhaps her sister had taken her to Muskoka for a week or so; perhaps his letters and the doctor's telegram

had somehow failed to reach her. In any case he must not excite himself—no doubt a letter would come to-morrow.

She did not know how serious the affair was, nor how very deeply her boy's feelings were involved. If she had, I doubt not she would have sought out Laura and demanded a complete unfolding of the case without delay. But day followed day, each making matters more difficult of explanation. Laura felt hurt that none of them had given her any hint of their intentions, yet she could not let anyone know she was hurt. At last she wrote—such a letter!

"Dear Kerry:

"My holidays are nearly over, and I shall soon return to Andrews' Bay" ("It sounds like a Second Class composition," she told herself disgustedly.) "It has been so exceedingly warm in town that I shall be glad to feel the lake breezes again. I have been staying with Grace for the last week or two—" She could not bring herself to speak of her mother, as he had not done so—"And we have felt the heat very much. How are you? I hope you are finding yourself stronger than you were. I often wonder how you like Toronto. Give my best regards to your mother and Dr. Gregory."

It was cruel, because it gave him no chance. He read it, stared blankly at the pages, laid them down beside him, and dropped swiftly back into the Land of Shadows. Well for him that John Gregory knew his business, and that Anne McCoy had given him a constitution sounder than most. Laura received no answer at all to that

epistle.

She felt old and weary as she dropped in the seat beside big John Cowie, and responded at intervals to his brief remarks. He told her of Mary and the boy; of little Benaiah Abercrombie; of Mary Maude Ellen Harris, who had been "keeping company" energetically with a young man from farther up the Peninsula; rumor had it that they were to be married before a great while.

"Can't tell, though," said John thoughtfully, "our young folks are queer. One couple got mad when some one found out the date they had set, so they changed it and went right out of the settlement to be married. But Mary Maude Ellen has put an awful pickle o' young men through her hands. It's time she was tied up now. But she'll may be not get him yet. I quote Francie; he knows."

"Who is the lucky man?" asked Laura, faintly interested.

John had known the lady from her youth up, and knew her particularly well since she had assisted Mary after the boy came. "I did not see anything of him before the holidays."

"Oh, it's an old affair. His name is Tom Burrows, and he has a farm near North Cape. Rocks and wilderness, I guess; he was after her years ago—but she was more particular then and not so near thirty-five. Well, there'll be great doings in the settlement when Maudie gets tied up."

Laura could smile at this.

"Francie was in the other evening to get some spavin cure for his rheumatic knee," went on the

big man, much pleased with his successful entertaining of the girl. "He was all worked up over it; sat on the wood box and talked a streak. Sez he: 'She's gey fulish if she marries a farmer (Then Jakie would snarl approval). She'll be rinnin' in wi' pails, an' rinnin' oot wi' pails—hettin' milk t' the cauvés, an' bilin' oats for the horses—pittin' doon meals t' men that's aye grummelin', grummelin'—warkin' airly an' warkin' late, aye in an awfu' wurry-gurry. Eh, but she's awfu' fulish t' marry a fairmer!' Never knew Francie to have so much to say."

This made her laugh.

"What does Mary think of it?"

His face clouded. "Oh, doesn't say much. Mary is—feeling better than she was, but the boy tires her."

There was a silence then for a mile or so, while the late afternoon sun sank lower in the sky, and beamed warmly into her face. Presently John said with an effort—"We were all very sorry to hear of your loss—very sorry indeed."

"Thank you, John," answered the girl quietly, and no more was said on that subject.

The miles slid past under the steady trot of John's team. A new bridge had been built where, at Easter time, Laura and the young student had made their hazardous crossing, but she hardly thought of that as they rattled over it. She was wondering about the old log house; would it be as it always had been, with the couch under the kitchen window, and Kerry's big chair in its place, while the bedroom doors stood familiarly ajar?" Or would it be dead, like the home where

she and her mother had been so happy—dead with stale air, quiet dust and haunting memories? She was very glad to go to Mary Cowie's; glad to think of the baby, whose velvet fingers would draw the ache perhaps from her heart. Soon the familiar old road, heavy with blow sand, brought them near to the well-known orchard and the low weathered buildings.

"Perhaps you would like to go in and get some of your things—or did you get them all away before the holidays?" suggested the big man. She shrank instinctively at the words.

"Oh—I won't bother—to-night—" she said in a voice which made him wonder. And so they drove on past the gate down the old road to the lake, then north into the bush, and at last John got down from the high seat and opened his own gate. Laura drove through; he closed it again—closed it on *that* chapter in her life, and shut it away forever.

They were a quiet household. Laura turned once more to her school with relief. Her first enthusiasm for the profession was gone, but in its place there came a deep determination to make good, to give these youngsters all she could of herself. They needed her—and oh, how she needed them! Benaiah Abercrombie, rather frail and white, was in his place again, beaming his welcome. Two little Harris girls important in crackling new print dresses were also on the scene in all the bravery of pink hair-ribbons. Of course they were barefoot—shoes were an unknown luxury in that neighborhood from the coming of the grass in the spring until the com-

ing of the snow in the fall. Laura had only the three children on the first day of school. The rest were diversely employed in helping to shock the skimpy wheat, draw in the late hay, or other tasks far beyond their childish strength.

By the end of the week the others began to straggle back again, and she took up her classes in their proper order. Thomas Law had scrubbed the old floor as clean as a plate, and the windows shone amazingly considering their smallness and the difficulty of polishing the tiny panes of glass. She had a number of books to add to her library, presented to her by her sisters, and she considered whether she might not reasonably ask the trustees to see about a proper receptacle for them. Meanwhile she piled them upon her desk where they stayed for some time.

One day she spoke to Crombie about it, explaining that she had gathered up a number of books and asking him what the trustees were prepared to do about finding a modest bookcase for them. Crombie nearly fainted.

"My lands o' liberty!" he ejaculated piously. "You must think this here section is made o' money! We're all taxed to keep up this blamed school an' to pay you—now you want a bookcase! Last teacher but one stung us \$28 fer them maps—never had no sich maps when I went to school, an' I guess I got around the world as well as anybody." He had once been as far away as Guelph.

"Well, I'll see what the other trustees think about it—"

"You'll see nothing of the kind," he snapped

unpleasantly. "You're here to teach, not to stir up the whole neighborhood with your good-for-nothing books, learnin' young ones to sit in the corner an' ruin their eyes over long words, when they should be out doin' up the chores. What good are books, anyway? Only a pack o' lies—better git 'em out o' the school, only what you have to use there."

Laura stood and looked at him, half-amused, half-contemptuous, feeling helpless, yet determined. Pity the poor children of such a father!

"I won't say what I'll do about it," she told him indifferently, "for I don't quite know until I hear from Inspector Gray." Then something of the new indomitable womanhood that was growing in her, leaped forth to tell Crombie that no small soul like his should defraud *her* children of their right to the music, the wisdom, the magic of the ages, as hidden in the printed pages from master minds. "I'll shake this old school section to fragments—I'll make you a laughing-stock to the Peninsula with your narrowness and your blindness! They *shall* have books—as many as they want! And you shall help to pay for them, too!"

She turned away from him, proud, defiant; but he ran after her and caught her by the arm. She looked at the detaining hand with eyes that brought the unaccustomed red into Crombie's face. He drew the hand away.

"Say—forget about the books! Just give the young one a plain eddication while you're at it; no frills. I want mine to work when they quit school, not to go nosing in a book. An' say—

about Benaiah. Push him along, can't you? Git him on into the next class where he'd ought to be now, only that accident. If you do the right thing by him, I'll stand a friend to you. Maybe the trustees might keep you on another year!"

This dazzling prospect failed to impress her properly.

"Do as you like. I have my own plans for next year. As for Benaiah, I shall certainly do my best for him, as for every other pupil in my charge. I am sorry for the child. He has never had a chance and never will have, while he stays with you. It seems as if you value him, not as an immortal soul given into your care, but as a beast of burden to be worked to the limit. Oh, think of it! He comes to school now, eagerly, but exhausted by the work he has to do before he starts. Only a child—a sick child at that!"

"How do you know so much?" he shouted furiously, enraged to the narrow soul of him. Laura nodded contemplatively.

"I know what he has to do—lifting water for eighteen head of cattle, and milking three cows night and morning, while that little bruised side is scarcely healed."

"I'll trim the young sneak till he learns to keep his mouth shut!"

"Oh, hush—for shame! Don't dare to lay a finger on him!"

"I guess I'll do what I like with my own son. Who'll interfere?"

"I will interfere!" said the girl calmly, drawing herself to her height and meeting his fiery gaze with eyes of power. "There is a law in

this country that can take a son from parents who abuse him wilfully. But," she added more mildly, seeing that the shot had gone home, "I am sure such measures will be unnecessary. You love your son, Mr. Abercrombie, and wish to make him strong and happy. It might be advisable to be a little indulgent with him until he regains his strength. You do not want him to meet the winter weak and unable to resist the cold?"

Crombie muttered unintelligibly and turned away, and the subject of a shelf for the books was left unsettled for the time. A few days later little Hannah Harris presented a request that the Teacher would go home with her. Mary Maude Ellen wanted her opinion on certain matters. So Laura sent a note of explanation to Mary, and walked down in the broiling August sun to the modest establishment of Mr. Harris.

She sat in state in the bare little Room until supper was announced, for she had learned to keep out of the kitchen when upon these formal visits. There were shifts and contrivances there not intended for the eyes of a stranger. At last the summons came and she laid aside the family photographs and the few picture post cards with which visitors were expected to occupy themselves, and went forth to the supper table.

Mr. Harris had dressed for company by adding a vest to his working outfit of shirt and faded overalls. Out of deference to the newly scrubbed floor, he left his boots out in the shed, and paddled around in grey socks of very ancient

vintage. Benjy Junior was on the scene with a face like an Italian sunset, and an embarrassment that threatened to choke him. Mary Maude Ellen, eldest olive branch, served out the fried potatoes to the assembled diners, with an impartial hand. The bent and tired little mother was almost hidden behind a teapot which was as broad in the beam as a potato kettle.

"Well!" said the paternal ancestor chuckling as he passed a platter of very fat pork. "Was the Teacher very cross to-day, Hannah? Who got licked?"

Laura knew this feeble joke of old, and it wearied her. Hannah giggled shyly and made no reply.

"They are pretty good little folks. I do not need to punish them often."

"Well, you know the old saying about lickin' and larnin', so don't spare the rod."

"I believe you must have been a regular young rascal in your day, Mr. Harris—you know so much about it!" said Laura, adding a few mustard pickles to the varied assortment of eatables upon her plate, and mentally thanking Providence for a cast-iron digestive system. It was a serious affront to the hostess if any dish was declined. Mr. Harris snorted with delight.

"You bet I was—I knew a few things—"

"Now Ben, you hush up! Don't be learnin' the young ones all your bad tricks—they learn them things quick enough! Pass over the fried cakes to the Teacher—she ain't got anything. Benjy, serve out the berries to her. I'm sorry I ain't got anything better for supper, but you'll

just make out, won't you, Teacher?"

"It's a good thing for me you haven't anything else," said Laura, laughing, as Benjy awkwardly spilled the raspberries into her lap. "For if you had another blessed thing on the table I'd only have to say 'No, thank you!' Are your girls all as good housekeepers as their mother?"

"Not one of 'em!" interjected their father while Mrs. Harris protested feebly. "They aint' one of 'em equal to their mother in any way—only weight—an' they can mostly pass her in that!"

As Mr. Harris was one of her trustees, Laura decided to spread out before him the vexed question of the library and shelves, and soon discovered the limitations of the average school trustee. He refused to commit himself in any way, saying that Crombie ought to know what was best, and would no doubt do the right thing.

"I did hope to start something of a library in the school that would be a help and inspiration to the neighborhood," said Laura, discouraged. "I got Mr. Law to make a little shelf for the first books, but it is the school section that should do this, not a private individual. Oh, well, if you don't want them I can easily take them away again—I have no wish to force them on any one. If people are only roused to think it over, now, they may receive the idea more readily at some time in the future."

"You didn't say nothing when you got them first books? You didn't ask the trustees then for shelves, or for permission to put 'em up?" asked the man uneasily, passing his big flat hand across

his mouth for purposes usually served by the table napkin.

"Oh no, I got Mr. Law to make me a shelf—it only cost me fifty cents, and it would not probably cost any more now for another!"

"Well, but don't you see you had work done unlawfully upon the school buildings, alterations, carpentry, nails drove in the walls—I just want to warn you that Crombie threatens he'll have you took up for defacin' the school prop'ty if you say any more about the business! I'm your friend, Teacher, but I'd a'vise you to go easy where Crombie is concerned. He's a rough customer to handle when he's cornered!"

Honest indignation almost choked the girl. To have her gifts thrust back upon her so boorishly was altogether intolerable. How could one shed the light upon people who were so determined to live in darkness? Yet there must be a way, surely—and she had no intention of abandoning her plan for her beloved children.

"Why does he object so to books? He can read, and has brains to understand—does he not see the advantage to be gained from reading of the right sort?"

Mr. Harris shook his head non-committally as he thrust his chair back from the table and set a tooth-pick in the south-west corner of his mouth.

"Can't tell nothin' about him, only he's bound to be contrary to everything an' everybody. Come on out, Teacher, an' see the colts."

"Come along, Mrs. Harris," said Laura linking her arm pleasantly in that of her hostess. Mary

Maude Ellen remained to clear the table. Ethel May took the pails out to the cow stable to milk, and frowned with annoyance when Mabel Irene defaulted from the task. Hannah Hester trailed after her mother. The youngest girl, who rejoiced in the name of Bermuda, clutched her father by the hand.

"I think 'Bermuda' is an awful pretty name, don't you, Teacher?"

"Do you know, it is a pretty name, and little Bermuda is a pretty child." Laura said it seriously. She had long since ceased to be amused at the unconscious and often rather pitiful strivings after the beautiful, of these people who had so little opportunity to gratify that natural instinct. It touched her keenly. Her own life had been so full of beauty and happiness, so free from drudgery and the tyranny of narrow-mindedness, that she was sometimes appalled to see the limitations of others. Very willingly she would share with them all that she had—but they repulsed her generosity, turning blindly to their own narrow ways. Or so she thought, not realizing that every life has its own horizon, its own joys and interests. School and its associated activities were the big thing in her life, but it was a small thing to these other people. Moreover, she accepted Crombie's attitude as typical, which it was not. It was quite exceptional, but because he was an aggressive citizen he was able to sway his neighbors who were indifferent on educational matters, but would quite as willingly have supported any one who showed the same intensity of determination in another direction.

CHAPTER XVIII

WEDDED UNDER THE POPLARS

MARY Maude Ellen handed to Laura a double sheet of ruled note-paper. In one corner was a roseate Cupid engaged in pouring forth certain high colored blossoms from a long, thick cornucopia. Laura opened the paper and read the following inscribed in a somewhat uncertain hand, with an entire disregard of capital letters and punctuation and various little formalities of spelling:—

“mr and mrs ben harris
reqest
the marrage of thear daugter
miss mary maude ellen harris
to
mr tom burrows
on wensdy sep 4 1901
three o'clock
r v s p”

“I dunno as I remember it all, *exact*, but I seen so many o' them invites when I worked in T'ronto that I'm pretty near sure of it. I got two dozen o' them writ out—but Tom was that mean he wouldn't help me or I'd a had them all done.” She beamed proudly upon the pile in her hand. “D'ye know what them letters stand for? ‘Reply

Very Soon Please.' "

"Good for you! I'd never have thought of that! Have you many more to write?"

"No, only a few. I wish—" she paused a little wistfully— "I'd like a real stylish weddin' but I dunno the ins an' outs of it. May be you would help me?"

"Why, of course," said Laura, sincerely glad to be of help to some one. "I'll help you every way I can. But remember, I don't know much about weddings. My mother—" her voice faltered a little—"always attended to everything when my sisters were married. They had very quiet church weddings."

"There ain't any church handy by—an' this ol' shack of a house ain't fit fer a girl to git married in. I've only got a little while to git things squared away now, but I thought I'd like to have 'It' tied under them popular trees by the gate. Weddin's mostly is under a wreath of flowers or sunthin'. Tom ain't got no artistic taste, like. He says 'Rush her through,' he says He asked me did I want to be engaged with a ring, an' I told him I wasn't awful pertic'ler if I was engaged at all or not. He went home mad that night but I got the ring. Howdy like it? He give four dollars and a half for it!"

"He certainly got the worth of his money," answered Laura, examining it with interest. It was a large opal, full of fiery colors, and looked most impressive upon the ample hand of Mary Maude Ellen.

"Emmeline and Elviry'll be home for 'It,'" she went on, importantly. "Emmeline'll be my

bridesmaid, and the other girls'll wait on the tables and put down the weddin' supper to the people. I don't want a lot of old weemen to get in my way an' bother me, nor I don't want a lot of babies squalling around. I have a good notion to just write it on the invites—'No babies wanted—' what do you think?"

"Oh, I don't believe I would—it might offend people!" said Laura hastily.

"All right—let 'em come. But nobody is to throw rice at me—I won't stand for it. This confectionairy paper is what they throw now. I kin make some like I seen in the city, an' they kin throw it."

So that important point was settled. My boy Benjy walked with Laura to the Cowie gate through the golden moonlight mist that hung about the land. Loons called mournfully to each other across the great unquiet waters of the bay. The mysterious beauty of the night made them both a little serious, and the silence was unbroken except for the muffled padding of their feet in the heavy sand of the road.

"D'ye know, Teacher," Benjy blurted out as they reached the turn of the road where, across the ghostly Clearance, the bay twinkled in the moonlight, and involuntarily they paused to enjoy it, "at night, like this, I feel like I could do wonderful things—when I set an' look at the stars they make me ashamed o' every mean trick I ever done. But when day comes, I'm just the same common Benjy again, nothin' big or noble about me!"

The girl turned kind eyes upon him, with the

joy of a discoverer. Benjy would never seem altogether vulgar or plebeian to her after that speech. Compunction stung her that she had misjudged him, and doubtless many others, just because she had not been able to guess the soul that lay under their everyday speech and manner. They walked on again.

"I guess everybody feels like that, at night," she said dreamily. "Day drops away from us, with all its weight of cares and worries, and our souls long for the impossible. It seems wasted time, spent on hopes and visions, but I don't believe we slide back quite to the old level, after we have dwelt awhile with the glory of the stars!"

He was silent, pondering the unaccustomed words. When finally he did speak, his remarks were so irrelevant to her train of thought that Laura was decidedly startled.

"I'm some dubious about this here weddin' o' Mary Maude Ellen's," he announced. "Like as not they'll all be keenin' an' honin' on each other's shoulders. Girls is like that—they got to cry, an' they cry as hard at a weddin' as at a funeral."

"Oh, yes," she answered, vaguely, bringing herself back to earth again, "But I'm sure, if they enjoy it—"

"Taint my idea of a happy time! But let 'em go to it, an' do what they like—they'll do that any way."

"Here we are," said Laura, laying her hand on the gate. "Goodnight, Benjy. Tell Maude I'll help her all I can."

"Yes—but say, you ain't mad at me, are you,

Teacher?" he said, deeply disappointed that she had not asked him to come in.

"Why, no—of course not! Why should I be?"

"Well, I never had much experience with a lady, and I didn't know whether I'd acted just right—?"

"Oh, if you always act as well as you have done to-night, you will do famously," she laughed, quite amused. "Good night!"

"Good night, Teacher!" And Benjy departed, much elated.

The trustees gave a half holiday for the great occasion, and well they might, for it was the first wedding to be celebrated in the neighborhood for many years, as the extreme modesty of the contracting parties invariably led them to have their knots tied in town, where nobody knew or cared anything about them. When Laura arrived at the house on that day, she found Mary Maude Ellen in a fine frenzy. Her "confectionairy paper" was ready, the whole house was scrubbed within an inch of its life, and the cellar was loaded to the guards with various toothsome viands. But while the bride wrought strenuously with her garments, the heartless bridesmaid was flirting openly with the groom, and not one of all her sisters appeared on the scene to hook Maudie into her gown! It was a task requiring muscle, but Laura managed it for her, and at last she was arrayed to her complete satisfaction in her dress of red lustre, with its little whiffets of white on the "upper spars," as my boy Benjy gracefully expressed it.

The day was warm, the dress was warm, and

under the stress of haste and excitement, the lady herself was in quite a temperature.

"The icing on my cake wouldn't set," she lamented, as she tested the curling tongs with a moistened forefinger, for the other details of her preparations had effectually ruined her coiffure. She recklessly wound a lank lock of hair upon the instrument of beauty, with a result that was anything but desirable. She burnt it completely off, about two inches from her head.

Then Mary Maude Ellen used one of those words which are always inexcusable, except in the estimation of the person who flings them forth. It was her great day—yet she had no one to stand by her and help her through. The others dropped all responsibility for the affair, leaving it, most selfishly, to her.

"I do declare!" she stormed flinging the curling tongs savagely across the steaming little room—"I'll never try to git married agin!"

Then she went after them and warmed them once more in the smoky little coal-oil flame with dogged persistence while she poured out more of her troubles.

"Tom brought a gallon of ice-cream from town, mind you—a whole gallon! I'll learn him to throw his money away, when I get him! An' the hull crowd just got around—they couldn't leave it for the supper. They ate up every last lick of it! And I—" she was very bitter—"it was for my weddin', an' I never had a taste!"

At last Laura had done all that she could, even in the matter of sympathy. She went and sat under one of the "popular" trees by the

gate, where the little school organ had been placed. There had been much discussion as to the selection she should play for the wedding march. Benjy had favored "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town To-night." Mr. Burrows suggested "I Wish I was Single Again," and thereby earned a black look from his bride-to-be. Mary Maude Ellen scorned the orthodox wedding marches, stating that there was nothing into such old-fashioned tunes; she'd ruther be married to the music of a hymn out of the book, and for a while hesitated between "Where is my Wandering Boy To-night?" and "God be with You Till We Meet Again." Neither of these seemed quite appropriate, therefore Laura had by request played over all sorts of music from her well stored memory. Finally Mary Maude Ellen decided that "Anchored" suited her best, for Laura had, after her usual custom with favorite music, adapted air and accompaniment to form a very pleasing melody from that splendid old song.

But Laura was not to begin the music until the bride actually appeared. She knew the moment was near, for she could hear the shrill voice out at the woodshed calling, "Paw! Paw! Where the mischeef air you, Paw? Git a move on. I'm waitin'!" And presently the bride emerged from the front door of the house, while "Paw" hung a step behind her, owing partly to the narrowness of the door and partly to the exceeding haste with which she had seized upon him. Round the corner of the house, almost as if by accident, sauntered Mr. Burrows, his hat

on the back of his head, his eyes goggling, a straw in the corner of his mouth, his hands in his pockets—not at all the ardent lover Laura had imagined from Mary Maude Ellen's descriptions. The errant bridesmaid was not visible.

Laura played softly upon the staggery organ, as it stood on the stone boat which had been used in drawing it from the school. Quite distinctly she heard Mary Maude Ellen respond "Maybe" to the "love, honor, and obey," clause, and dropped her eyelids to hide her amusement. At last, at the close of the ceremony, when Mr. Burrows stood uncertain what to do next, his loving bride seized him by the arm and kissed him, loudly and impressively—a proceeding which he neither resented nor encouraged.

Then stood forth Crombie, resplendent to the extent of a gay necktie, and fresh blacking upon his boots, items which marked his otherwise dingy attire with a gala aspect. He wished to make a little speech.

"The lady who has just become the wife of our esteemed friend and neighbor, Mr. Burrows, has been well and favorably known to us for years. For a great many years, in fact. Longer than some of us can remember!" he said it with splendid oratorical effect, while the new Mrs. Burrows wished she had him by the craw neck of him, till she'd shake a little sense into his head! "We wish to congratulate her on getting a fine man like Mr. Burrows—she done well for herself. And we wish to congratulate Mr. Burrows, too, in getting this excellent wife. He got her, friends, right out from amongst our midst—and

we are very glad to think that it is so! Now I'm sure it is only right we should give some expression of our pleasure upon this joyful occasion—" Mrs. Burrows leaned a little forward, with a set smile upon her lips. At this stage it was customary to produce a pickle-cruet or green-and-red photograph album as the case might be. "I will therefore call upon you, one and all, to give three cheers for Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Burrows—all together now—Hip, Hip, Hooray!"

Poor Mary Maude Ellen! Her lips trembled with disappointment, but Mr. Burrows stepped forward, nodded briefly and passed around a box of cigars. Then from somewhere a football was produced, and he, with the masculine guests, adjourned to the king's highway for a little recreation. Mary Maude Ellen, having acknowledged the good wishes of her friends, dodged around the corner of the house to the woodshed, where she gathered up a pan of chips to light the supper fire. She drew on a large blue apron, and clattered the stove lids with hands that knew their business. The table had been laid from corner to corner of the kitchen, and was set for twenty-five people. At this she should have had of course, the high seat of honor, but as she said bitterly, if she sat down to eat, who would wait on the tables? When the fire was roaring satisfactorily and the tea kettle set down to boil, she kilted up her skirts and went out to milk—otherwise there would be no milk for the tea! Benjy, however, relieved her of this task, and stormed so effectually at Emmeline, Elviry, Ethel May and Hester Hannah that they were a little ashamed of

themselves and made overtures of assistance to their departing sister.

The next flaw in her happiness came when her mother chose to get "mad" at her over a small matter of teaspoons, and went away to bed sulkily, although it was not near sundown, and she had had no supper. This, the bride confided to Laura, made her "feel her neck something terrible!" The minister and his wife were not able to wait for supper, but drove away presently with a little white calf (contributed by Mr. Harris) in the back of their democrat, as payment in full for services rendered in tying "It" under the "popular" trees.

At last the kettle boiled. The cold meat, pickles, bread and butter, and so on, had been set forth upon the table, and Laura was sent out with a list of twenty-five people whom she was to gather in to the feast, for the potatoes were boiled and mashed, beaten to a foam with just the right quantity of cream, butter and seasoning, and the tea was boiling merrily—boiled tea, alas! So she went forth and gathered up her listed personages, and summoned the groom, dusty and dishevelled, from a particularly hot scrimmage. She had seen him on other occasions, but the formality of an introduction had been omitted.

"Air you the Teacher?" he asked her, when she had given her message.

She confessed meekly, for sufferance is the badge of all the teaching tribe. He turned towards the house, holding his coat over his arm.

"Where'd you go to school? T'ronto?"

"No, Hamilton. But I have been a good deal in Toronto—"

"Know many people there?"

"I know some," she responded cautiously, halting, for she did not care to go further with him. He might insist on having her sit down by him in the bride's place!

"Say," he went on, confidentially lowering his voice, and advancing his turnip eyes to an unpleasant nearness, "Did ye know a feller name o' Stubbs? Kep' a t'bacco shop on Queen Street—awful fine dancer, *he* was. Him and me was great friends."

Alas, Mr. Burrows' interest waned considerably when he learned that Laura knew nothing of the illustrious Mr. Stubbs.

"Wal, now, it's a wonder you wouldn't know him—" and he turned modestly away to blow his nose upon the small danger signal that he kept for the purpose. "Don't let nobody get a rope on you fer the first dance to-night. That's mine; don't fergit now!"

Shaking his finger playfully, he sauntered away towards the house and Laura, considerably amazed, sought out the next name on her list. It was Francie. She found him smoking dourly, with Jakie at his feet, in a quiet corner of the lawn.

"They want you to go in to supper now, Francie," she said with restraint, for in her mind he was unalterably associated with one who had not been long in forgetting her.

"Hae," said Francie fumbling in his pockets. "I hae gotten a letter—lie doon, Jakie, ye wee deevil! Haud yer wheesht, I'm seeck an' tired o'

the soun' o' yer vice—I hae gotten a letter an' I'll no can read it. Tak' it wi' ye—I'll be doon tae the schule yin o' they days, an' ye can write oot an answer tae 't for me.'

He thrust a crumpled letter into her hand, and watched her face grow deadly white as she recognized the writing. Then she turned away silently, clutching it close, so close! As she went she dropped her well thumbed list, which Francie immediately picked up, and with his glasses on his nose, read without the slightest difficulty. Such is the tremendous difference in hand writings. He summoned the remaining seven, and they went in to the banquet, but Laura, down by the bay, seated on her great throne rock, had forgotten all about him and Mary Maude Ellen and the help she was to give in this great event.

She spread out the letter upon her knee, but did not read it at once. Perhaps there was, after all, no message in it for her in any remote way! At this thought she trembled greatly, in such agitation that she could not distinguish the words. The brisk evening breeze fluttered the pages, so that she thrust them, all but the first one, into the bosom of her dress. Then she gathered herself together, and read:—

"Dear Francie ("How tremblingly he writes!" she thought).

"I am doing well, they tell me, and some day I shall be a man again." ("Oh, thank God, thank God!" cried the girl in an ecstasy of gladness). "It has been a pretty close thing with me. I must not write much. But tell me, Francie, how is she?

How does she look? I depend on you to let me know." "Then he has not altogether forgotten!" she said to herself, wild color leaping to her cheeks. The big rambling carefully written words occupied three small pages. He had been at such pains to make it legible to the old Scotchman! She sat upon the rock dreaming, happier than she had been in weeks, while the level rays of the dying sun struck metallic lights in her dark hair, and found new beauties in her grey eyes. Gulls swooped across the wind-smitten water, and the heavy clouds banked upon the horizon. Far out, the islands raised their tufted heads, and broke the line of the water. The lovely wildness of it crept into her heart and gave her a sense of infinite beauty and enjoyment. How foolish she had been to doubt Kerry! There was a reason for his silence, as she saw now. She would write and tell him—ah, what would she tell him? If he could write to Francie why could he not as easily have sent a letter to her? And down to the ground with a crash, came her rosy dreams and castles in the air.

There on the big boulder in the gathering chill of the September evening, she fought it all to the end. With shivering hands clasped about her knees, and dark hair blown wild about her face, she worked out the problem. The letter certainly indicated that he cared. If so, the next move was with him. She must build her life without taking any count of him, until that move was taken. And her hurt pride bade him beware! Not for long would she wait for him! Then inconsistently her thoughts strayed to him, in hospital,

with nurses and doctors about him. Had he much pain? Or did he simply lie serenely there and grow strong again? With startling distinctness she saw all at once, his pale face with the deep-set dark eyes burning feverishly; the thin hand outflung above his head; the parched lips murmuring again and again an inarticulate name.

Her hand went to her throat; the proud, lonely head drooped, and hot tears filled her eyes. "I thought I loved him," she whispered to herself, "but this cannot be love that considers itself and its own dignity at every turn! Oh God, be gentle with Kerry and me! We are young and—and we make mistakes—and hurt each other so! Lord, I have neither father nor mother to guide me—Oh mother, mother!" she broke off with a little wail, burying her face in her hands. Drooped and still she crouched for a few moments. Then she was done with tears. She set her teeth upon her trembling lip, flung back her head, descended from the rock and walked determinedly to the house.

"I must think of the school and the children, and not of these things that hurt me so, or I shall begin to pity myself—ah, that is weak! I hate sentimentality—surely I am not becoming sentimental myself! I must work, fill my mind with other interests, think nothing of Kerry until he comes to me himself. And if he is too long in coming, I shall just forget him."

Which was all very well, but under her pillow that night was something that crackled like three sheets of note paper, and had a fragrance of Francie McAllister's tobacco. In a day or so

Francie came to the school just at four o'clock. He had an envelope, a stamp and a sheet or two of foolscap.

"Dinna waste the gude paper," he cautioned her, and laid it on the desk. "Noo pit doon what I tell ye—nae mair, nae less. So:—

"Thon confoondit letter wis a' wrangle-tangle. I cudna mak' odds or ends o't, but the Teacher read it for me—she's a ceevil body, though unco plain-faced-ed. Noo I'm gey pleased tae ken ye hae gotten yer bones buckled togither, an' houp ye'll hae nae setbacks—hae ye thon?" he suddenly enquired, and being reassured, proceeded:—

"The hay wis a guid crop. Ye canna find ony fauts wi' the wheat eithers. It done weel eneuch, forbye the winter near killed it. An' the hoats is turnin' oot gran'; ye'll hae twa hunner' bushel tae sell—peety the price wasna mair! Yon Benjy Harris is no richt wise for warkin'; mind, I'm tellin' ye. His heid is nocht but a toom—hech, hae ye gotten a' that? Weel then:—"

"He might be o' some use, but since he has been coortin' the Teacher—"'

"Francie, I won't write that!"

"Whit way will ye no? Are ye feared o' him kennin'—?"

"I won't write it, Francie," she repeated quietly, without offering any explanation. He eyed her for a moment.

"A' richt, then. Write this: She willna pit doon what I say, but I'll be tellin' ye whan I send ye a letter by ma ain hand. Ye say—Hoo is she? Hoo dis she look?" (Laura's head drooped lower, while the small swift eyes of

Franeie scanned her closely, squinting terrifically.” “I canna say as she looks weel. Her hide is rough, an’ she fell an’ skived her leg—”

Laura’s gasp halted him. He stared at her with a twinkle of malice in his eyes. He spoke gently.

“Did ye no ken I wis keepin’ yon black filly o’ Kerry’s for him? Ay, a puir bit o’ horseflesh she is—nae wunner! Weel, pit it doon:—Ye might send me what he wad notice o’ spavin cure, till I tak’ the lump off her knee. Noo, ha’ mind o’ yersel’ in yon evil city o’ Toronto—losh, gin I was there masel’ I wad pairsonally show ye thaе evil things ye sud be wairned o’. Gie ma respects tae her mither, an’ tae that decent man, the doctor. Hech, he was an intelligent pairson for a city mon. . . . Noo write: Yer obedient sairvant, Francis McAllister.”

Laura did as she was told, addressed the envelope, and offered to seal it, but he would not let her. “I might change ma mind an’ want tae pit in mair news masel’. I’ll no waste the stamp.”

He travelled away, without a word of acknowledgment. Laura rose with the same quiet restraint that now characterized her, and proceeded to close up the school for the day. What would she thought if she could have seen Francie three hours later, sprawled over the kitchen table, with the painful pen in his gnarled and twisted fingers!

“Dear Lad, (he wrote laboriously, without regard for literary style or any other scholarly accomplishment).

“I’m awfu’ thankful ye are gettin’ weel agin. Yon lass o’ yours is somethin’ ailin’ wi’ her big

eyes an' her black goon. Her face whiles is white as paper. Yon fool Benjy Harris is coortin' her, rinnin' ta John Cowie's nicht efter nicht an' settin' by hoors in the wood-box: I'm wearyin' t' ye come hame. Losh, it'll be a long winter t' me here. . . ."

The letter she had written for him lay black upon the stone hearth. He had never had any intention of sending it, for though he could be cruel to her, he could not be cruel to Kerry. He folded up his own soiled and smeared effort, and posted it, in the envelope which Laura had addressed. So he paid the debt he had never forgotten, since the Sunday when she cast Jakie forth, and had practically evicted his master as well.

CHAPTER XIX

REFORMING THE RURAL SCHOOLS

IN the course of time Laura heard from Inspector Gray, and the letter filled her with dismay, for he showed her that while trustees have wide discretionary powers, they are not under any obligation with regard to libraries and so on. If the people of the section made the library possible, or if it was given outright to the school, then the children had it. But for rural school trustees to spend a cent beyond what was actually required of them—it was unheard of!

"It isn't fair!" she said bitterly to her friends, John and Mary Cowie. "In towns where they have other advantages of music and travel and contact with educated people—there, behold you is a school library of hundreds of books, and all sorts of aids to the children! Here where the youngsters are set back from every outside help, they cannot have the least thing to encourage them, or broaden their horizon! I tell you, Mary, at this rate of going, no enthusiastic and ambitious mother will be content to raise her children in the country—no child who is worth his salt will want to stay there! What then? Inside of one generation the whole nation will be wrong end up, standing on its head! Nobody will want

to live in the country, if that means ignorance and lack of opportunity!"

"There is indeed something in what you say," said John thoughtfully. "I've thought that country children did not get half a chance!"

"To him that hath shall be given, and so the city child gets it fine school buildings, lectures, singing lessons, concerts, gymnasiums; every room heated, lighted and made as convenient as can be, when anyone can see that it is the country children who should have the best buildings—see how far they walk! And the concerts and lectures—for they have no chance to get them except through the school. But instead of that the teacher's salary is lower there than elsewhere—and so the teachers won't go to the country if they can get any other place, for after all, teachers are human; they are young, have a certain amount of education, and want to be associated with people like themselves. What has the average country school to offer by way of inducement? Very little, if anything. I feel it keenly, that there is no encouragement given to any effort at improving conditions or helping the children to help themselves!"

"Votes for Women!" laughed John in his deep, pleasant voice. "Don't you think you take it too seriously? Libraries and all the rest of it will come to the country schools in the course of time—is there any need for you to worry yourself about it?"

"Oh, how can you speak so! What if they do come—in time—what of these children now? If it were your own boy, would you be willing

to have him walk as far as the Kinney children do, nearly three miles each way? Would you like to think of him in the dead of winter crying with the cold, stumbling in the snow, with his poor little lunch frozen solid before ever he gets to school—nothing hot for his dinner, not even a hot drink to warm him up?"

"Well, no," he answered slowly. "I had intended that when he grew old enough to go to school we would probably move into town—at least Mary could take him there for a time anyway, whether I went or not."

She whirled upon him, including Mary in this strange new passion for her children.

"Then you must not do it! That is shirking—sliding away from conditions that should rather be met and altered. You are a strong man, John Cowie—use your strength here. You, Mary, have education and a love for beauty—perhaps the Lord sent you here because He needed you here. This is your place—you must make it a good place for your son to grow up in. If the tendency of our educational system is to draw people from the simple life to the complex, it is wrong, isn't it? Wrong and ridiculous! You—*you* must make it so that all our schools, no matter where situated, have equal opportunity to serve. You must see to it that your son's son, anywhere, will have an equal chance with the son of the Governor General!"

"Bless me, that's a large order!" said John eyeing her doubtfully. "Do Governor-Generals have sons? I thought they were more remarkable for daughters! But see here, how is this

thing to be done? It would overturn the whole political system of the Province, wouldn't it? Besides the difficulty involved, what solution of the problem would commend itself to all? These reforms must be worked out slowly and experimentally."

"Is that the way you do? If you have been sowing clover in a field and want buckwheat in it, do you start out with a handful of buckwheat and increase the amount each year until the clover is crowded out? Hardly. As for how to do it, there is a way, and I shall never rest until I find it. You have a vote, you are a citizen of this country, but Mary and I have a greater power, for we can influence the children to think and to desire high things; after all, the children of to-day will be the nation of to-morrow. I have been thinking about it for days; it seems to me that in the rural school lies the answer to most of our country's troubles—the liquor question, divorce, and all those vexed problems that enter so largely into the life of the nation."

"Oh, yes, perhaps; but you must remember that the homes have an influence too, and all the strength of indifference. And there are a good many other things to consider. Perhaps your enthusiasm will cool and the torch will drop unheeded from your hands. It will be a tremendous task—the task of a life time. Reforms are very hard on the reformers. I have no doubt that you can do a great deal, but consider the price you will have to pay—in time and tears and disappointments, in discouragement and despair. And you will probably earn only the sneers and

ingratitude of those you try to help!"

Laura recoiled, gazing at him almost with despair in her eyes. She flung out her hands protestingly.

"I know—I know! And I dread and fear it all—but yet I believe I am more afraid of being afraid than of being hurt. . . That has kept me going many a time long after the heart was out of me. And after all, some one has to take this up sooner or later; some one must bear the pain and labor of it. Why should we three not make a beginning now?"

John stared thoughtfully at the floor between his feet, picking up a small white sock that lay there. He spread it out on his broad palm—his responsibility. Mary, in a low chair in front of the fireplace, was warming the small feet of the drowsy baby, who, having tasted of his thumb and found it good, was forthwith endeavoring to sample his whole hand. She spoke now, lifting her eyes from the rosy dimpled limbs of the splendid boy.

"Be definite, Laura. State in particular what is wrong with the rural schools of Ontario, and what should be done to remedy matters."

"This then, in the first place. The country schools are not given their proper recognition; salaries are lower, equipment poorer, discouraging circumstances more frequent, more accentuated than in the cities, towns, even villages."

"And why," Mary went on, as she carefully rolled the warm flannel petticoat about the child's limbs and pinned it there, "Why should it be otherwise? Why should country schools be con-

sidered of more importance than city schools? Fewer children attend—is not our motto ‘The greatest good for the greatest number?’”

“Oh, but listen! It is so hard to explain, because I know so little about it! But here in Canada are broad acres, scant population. In contrast, take England, small surface, heavily crowded. It stands to reason such a land as that must look to ours sooner or later for its daily bread; if we let our people drift to the city and forget the plow, what does it mean? Trouble of some sort, doesn’t it? But more than that, think of the value of farming—agriculture, perhaps is a better word, to people themselves. It is honest and natural labor, clean to the hands and the heart. It is productive; it stands on a foundation centuries old, and it offers opportunities unbounded to intellect and genius of every sort. Properly carried on, it gives strength and nourishment to the whole man; body, mind, and soul!”

Mary gazed at her in some astonishment. Truly these were strange words from one who was little more than a child in years and experience!

“Would you then, have all education on that basis, that agriculture is of supreme importance?”

“Oh, no. Farmers must know something outside of farming. The curse of the calling has been its insularity.”

“And just what do you mean by ‘insularity’? It sounds to me like a lightning-rod advertisement,” put in John with his eye on the clock; chores have to be done, and his time was drawing short.

"An insular person is one who is entirely surrounded by himself," answered Laura laughing. "His horizon needs widening. The school house should be the centre of the community. Any one, young or old, should be able to find there books, music, light and warmth, day or night, food if he is hungry, money if he is in need!"

John rose and made her an elaborate bow.

"Please, Teacher, I feel a little faint. May I go out doors awhile and revive myself? I'm dizzy!"

"Don't make fun of me!" pleaded the girl. "Only think of it and see what it would mean. There is no place to go in the evenings, is there? Nothing to lift you an inch, unless you haul yourself up with your own windlass—and who can sit in the bucket and turn the handle at the same time? Now if you knew that at the school house there were magazines, newspapers, a few of the neighbors, some one to play a little on the organ, some one to sing perhaps—would you not care to go? Would you grudge the trifle it would cost? Would you get any good from it?"

John nodded. "But what about this food for the hungry and money for the needy? Or is that just a rosy dream, and not a genuinely practical idea?"

"I don't know," she answered faltering a little, "I can see these things like vague shapes in the distance. The nearer view with its network of details and routine, bewilders me. But here for instance, there is no bank nearer than the railway—right across the Peninsula, and if you want money for improvements on your farm, you have

real difficulty in getting it. At the same time, every man who improves his acres, or undertakes to raise cleaner crops and better animals, adds by just that value to the value of—Canada! I don't know how the banking part of my vision would work out, but if it could be done as practical work by the school children, I imagine they would make better progress in their arithmetic! The food question has bothered me for a long time. It is not right to have little children coming to school day after day through their growing years with such lunches as I see—nearly always frozen solid in winter time—think of it! Or hopelessly mashed in summer. It is carelessness that permits it—cruel criminal waste of the little children who are not able to make their protests heard."

"But what can be done about it? Few of these children could afford even the little that would be necessary to pay for a hot meal daily. And where would you find teachers able and willing to prepare it for them anyway?" said Mary, the ever practical, swaying lightly back and forth with the sleeping child in her arms.

"I do not see any real obstacles there. Where there is a will there is a way, usually several ways. It can be done and it must be done, for the sake of the children and for the sake of the nation. The great lion in the path, as I see it, is the ignorance—lack of knowledge would be a kinder phrase—of our law-makers upon the subject. If any of them ever walked such a hard path in their youth they have probably forgotten it, or have come to the comfortable conclusion

that all that is changed now. Their children will not be starved in the way we know of—they will be properly cared for in the best institutions of the land. So there, John, is your part of the work—Mary's too. You won't go far without her."

"I'm afraid I don't see it," he said dubiously, desiring responsibility in the matter not at all, and rather dreading what she might say.

"Yes, you do. Politics. Make yourself County Councillor, Reeve, Warden. Work up to Parliament where you can make your voice heard. You have your son to consider—is he worth it?"

"Mary—Mary! Do you hear her? You know I cannot do it—it takes brains, and money for those things. I have neither fortune nor favor in high places—"

Mary turned her eyes full upon him, wistfully regarding him for a long silent moment.

"I think a man carries his own ammunition with him. You can do anything that is worth doing if you try hard enough. But somehow I don't just see where you fit in to this picture. It seems to me that Laura as a teacher is the one to agitate and exploit the matter!"

Laura shook her head. "You are the source of supply. You are the parent. I must teach according to the regulations—it is for the voters to alter any of those that are inadequate before they become harmful. Education should tend to hold the best people on the farms, because the farmers have such a tremendous power in their hands! Ignorant power—what a terror that is! If at some future crisis they learn their

strength yet lack the wisdom and patriotism that a miserly government has denied them, can you not see how dearly the nation will pay for its years of neglect? I know it is the tendency of youth to run to extremes and fads—and I know that I am a very small person to have such large ambitions; but this seems to lie in my path. You will help with it, will you not? Think of it, Mary. The children need more, deserve more, out of the school than it gives them to-day. Why should we not make an effort to improve matters? That is what it amounts to."

"I see plainly that we'll never be reduced to talking about our neighbors as long as you are with us!" said John, picking up his hat. "While Mary and I get our breath, you might just sketch out a sort of campaign, and put your ideas, intentions, grievances and desires into black and white. Nothing like it. Moreover you will need it for the publicity part of your warfare. As a preliminary, I'll do the chores." And he went out, pondering deeply.

But Laura sat silent, amazed at the lengths to which her own intensity had carried her, and very unsure of herself. Mary rose softly and laid the baby in his bed. Then she came back again to her chair.

"Where did you get all these strange ideas, Laura? You were not like this when I first knew you." Laura turned slowly, doubtfully.

"No, I suppose I wasn't. I thought only of myself then—the work was important as it affected me. Now I can see it from the point of view of the children. I see each day's lessons

not as a certain routine to be gone over for examinations, but as a part of the child's whole life. I don't know what made me suddenly see it—but you know how it is when you look at a room or a person, or a place, and all at once you understand something that has been hidden for so long! Mother used to say "Sometimes God takes away that which is near and dear to us, so that we may see what would otherwise be hidden from us." You know, I had intended to be a kindergarten teacher—and why? Because the work appealed to me! Not that little children needed me, you understand, but simply from the selfish point of view."

"And do you mean to tell me," demanded Mary, eyeing her keenly, "that you propose to drop everything else to take up this somewhat quixotic matter of educational reform?"

"Oh no," said the girl quickly, "Not unless I have to. I must earn my living, and I can best follow out the other work by keeping as closely in touch with it as possible. But I cannot do anything now, except to keep it in my mind and let it build itself there first. I shall have to study it—study, study, until I know the reasons and the causes—"

"And fog yourself completely! Take my advice and go to see the Minister of Education in Toronto during the holidays. Talk to him!"

Laura laughed. "He would not see me—pshaw! He would only laugh at my presumption. A letter would never get to him, and what good would it do if it did?"

"Then who is your member? Interest him—he

will get you an interview with the Minister. What other ways are there?"

"I'll just have to think it over. But I'm not going button-holing people, and forcing my opinions upon all and sundry. This is not a matter of opinions; it is a case of national neglect, which must be remedied nationally, as it will be when it is recognized. The fault lies, it seems to me, very much in the fact that so much power rests in the hands of the trustees. They feel it a point of merit to run the school as cheaply as possible, not seeing that education is the most priceless jewel that can be given to a child; it is worth sacrifices. If a sum equal to ten per cent of the teacher's salary were to be spent yearly in equipment, improvements and so on, it would not mean much expense to the section, but it would mean a great deal of inspiration to the pupils, no less than the teacher—Why, what is that?" she broke off, rising from her chair.

There was a noise of weeping and fumbling at the door. Swiftly she opened it, and drew in the forlorn figure of Benaiah Abercrombie, clutching to his meagre boyish breast a small whimpering object which in the gathering dusk, Laura at first failed to recognize for a tiny puppy.

At sight of her the boy broke into heart-rending sobs, flinging himself down upon the floor in a perfect abandon of grief—the pitiful grief of a child. Laura considerably astonished, lifted him up bodily and took him upon her knee in the big deep old rocking chair, while the naked, shivering pup squirmed exceedingly.

"There—there! You are all right now! Stop the crying, my man, for it hurts me!" She knew how it must wrench that bruised side of his, too. For a few moments he cried comfortably upon her shoulder, revelling in the shelter of her arms and in her sure sympathy. Childlike, he loved the touch of her soft and faintly perfumed handkerchief. "Now can you tell me?" she said gently. And between sobs, he told her.

"Lizzie h-had four pups (gulp) this one—was for—you. (More gulps.) But paw was mad—er something. Said he'd kill 'm all. An' he did; only this one. Comin' up with 'e cows, I seen—oh I seen where he killed 'm!" The little body quivered with remembered horror, but he mastered himself with an effort and went on. "An' this one—was layin'—an' wriggin' an' cryin'. So I just run quick with it to you! Oh I hate him—an' I won't ever go back!"

She made no answer, simply holding him gently to her, while Mary lighted the lamp and replenished the fire, for the evenings were dark and cool, and the sun had set. Presently he ceased to fret, heaved a long sigh of weariness and closed his eyes; so Laura sat with him until his breathing told her that he slept. Then she rose, while the awkward body sagged in her arms, the pup still tightly held even in slumber. She laid him tenderly upon the low old couch, arranging his slight limbs with careful hand.

"He is simply exhausted," she said softly to Mary. "Poor youngster! A pup for me—wasn't that dear of him! A little anxiety will be good for Crombie; if it wasn't for the boy's mother I

wouldn't have any compunctions about keeping Benaiah altogether!"

"Kidnapping! A nice person you to be a teacher! But what are you going to do with the pup?" Mary lifted the shuddering little creature from the boy's hands and carried it over to the fire place, where it crawled blindly about in the heat complaining bitterly. Bing, the cat, roused at that woeful sound, and stretched himself. A friend in need! He advanced to the scene with languid interest, extended a tentative paw, sniffed a little and sat down to see the sight. Puppy, staking all on one throw, staggered towards him and nosed up against the immaculate sleekness of his natural foe. But there was no hostile demonstration whatever! A swift red tongue came delicately forth and began to lick the trembling little stranger. Soon the two were peaceably cuddled together in front of the heat. Like the lion and the lamb, thought Laura, and softly covered the sleeping boy.

CHAPTER XX

STALKING THE BOOK BORROWER

IN the course of an hour or so, Crombie came, looking for his boy, who still slept upon John Cowie's kitchen couch.

"Don't waken the child!" Laura said warningly when Crombie advanced to rouse him. "Let him sleep—he needs it!"

But Benaiah had opened his eyes at the sound of his father's voice and sat up dizzily, a forlorn childish figure.

"Come on, Benaiah," said his father, laying a hand on the thin shoulder. "A fine fright you gave me, runnin' away over here! Come on—your mother is near distracted!"

Benaiah hesitated. He had meant to say that he would never go back—that he would only run away if he made him go; but home is home, after all, and a pup is a small matter to take such extreme measures over. He could not say it—so he said nothing at all.

"Thank you very much for the pup, Benaiah," said Laura, wondering what Crombie would say. "I shall take every care of it, because you gave it to me. See if you can choose a nice name for it."

Then she stooped and kissed him upon the

forehead, while Crombie looked on with disgust. *He* would never coddle the youngster so! He had already taken in the significance of the pup's presence, but chose to ignore it. His manner, although somewhat impatient, was not unkind. Benaiah, stumbling sleepily, followed him to the door, and without the formality of leave-taking the two disappeared into the darkness.

"Well, upon my word!" said Laura emphatically, going back to her chair. "What right has a man like that to have such a son! Think of Benaiah, sensitive, frail child—and think of Crombie, understanding him as little as though he were a citizen of another planet!"

"Oh yes," was Mary's indifferent answer. "But no one does ever understand any one else. People are too busy living their own lives to be troubled with investigating the motives and feelings of others. Sometimes you get a little look inside of the windows of your neighbor's self—and unless you are interested greatly, you do not seek to learn more. Or it might be that your eyesight is not good enough to see much anyway, or it may be that you do not care for exploring at any time. Benaiah is all right—he will probably misunderstand his own sons, if ever he grows to be a man, which I sometimes doubt, indeed!"

The pup was quite a problem. It was only a few days old, and quite helpless. Mary hunted up a bottle from which Cowie Junior had been accustomed to comfort himself with water. Into this she poured a small quantity of new milk, adding a little sugar and water. The pup made

away with it greedily, ceased complaining, and rolled himself up trustfully beside Bing. Laura further ensured his comfort by surrounding him with an old coat, and so made him snug for the night.

"We'll just have to feed him like a baby, I suppose, Mary?" She knelt beside the peaceful puppy with an expression of deep interest—a very charming pieture. Her color was coming back as time helped her to take life calmly again. She no longer grieved constantly for her mother—the pain was quieter. With regard to Kerry, she was deeply hurt, but she was not by any means broken-hearted. It seemed best to think of him as little as possible, and because her mind was full of her mother, she succeeded fairly well. Kerry had come into her horizon, filling it completely and happily—for a time. Then separation came, and the death of her well-loved parent gave her other things to dwell upon, altering her outlook completely. Now because Kerry had not reinstated himself in her life, because he had not essayed any further claim upon her, she could not help but resent his seeming neglect. She could never forget him, for he had taught her heart to beat more quickly and her lips to quiver because of him. But at this time her wounded pride would have made it rather easy for another to take his place. She strove to thrust all thoughts of him fiercely into the background—yet thought of him a hundred times when she was not conscious of it. Even as her strong slender hands arranged the little waif in his bed her mind reverted to Mary's sarcasms regarding Crombie

and Benaiah. It was not true; people did understand each other—if they cared enough! Kerry had understood her so readily— Yet there she halted; knowing him kind and generous and true, had she not been over-hasty in doubting him?

She frowned perplexedly. The same old tread mill! It was not a case of doubting him—she was simply waiting for him to say what *he* must say—it was not for her to suggest it. So—think of something else!

“Mary,” she said abruptly, “you know those books I have at the school? Some one has taken one of them, one of the last ones I brought.

“Are you sure? Which one was it?”

“No mistake about it. There are not many books altogether, and I missed it at once. It was a remarkably well illustrated copy of Wordsworth’s poems—not at all what any one would want to steal I should think. Whoever has taken it, has taken it to read—so who can it be? It was there yesterday, and gone this morning. Would Thomas Law do such a thing?”

“Why should he? You would willingly let him have it if he asked for it—then why break into the school at night to take it? Besides, Thomas Law has a genuine regard for you—I don’t think he would risk displeasing you.”

Laura looked up, still kneeling upon the floor. “Then who in the world can it be? Who is interested in books, yet afraid of me? Mary—Mary! I believe it is Crombie! I believe he is curious, yet ashamed to ask about the books! I do believe he just wants to know—what they are like, and has taken one at random to examine

it! Oh, Wordsworth's poems—what a choice—if he has chosen it!"

She jumped to her feet in excitement, yet remembered even then the caution that is due to a sleeping baby. She danced gaily across the room in suppressed delight. "I'll catch him—I'll trap him! Maybe he will think so much of 'We are Seven' that his hard heart will relent and see the desirability of housing such treasures carefully. He's the stumbling block, but I begin to have hopes for him!"

"You know—" Mary said slowly—"Crombie is very narrow minded, and he is mean too. But Laura, work drives these men day in and day out, their whole lives long, until they can see nothing but the work and the meagre living they get from it. It is not altogether Crombie's fault that he is what he is. Narrow-mindedness is like anaemia—it is due to a lack of something. Probably Crombie has never realized that lack, but is he to blame for the effects of it?"

"No, I suppose not. Well, I'm going to bed to plot for the capture of the book-borrower." And away she went to turn over the new idea in her mind.

A day or so later, the book was back in its place when she arrived at school, and there was no trace of the hand that had taken it. It smelt most vilely of tobacco, but as almost every man in the neighborhood smoked, that told nothing. After that, about once a week, a book disappeared to be returned a few days later. Laura was quite certain that Crombie was the offender—and she was right. Crombie was having the time of his

life—he was like an adventurer who has gone forth duck-hunting, and has discovered the goose that lays golden eggs. For he had discovered books. He was a reader—oh yes—of the daily paper; but in the matter of books he had made almost his first plunge, upon Wordsworth's poems. Of these he understood little, yet the gentle simplicity of the thoughts of that kindly poet, reached out and touched somewhere an answering chord in Crombie. He was like those “fools who came to scoff,” but remained to pray, caught in his own web. Plain curiosity had moved him to investigate these books about which such a bother was made; but curiosity turned to interest, vital and intense as the books Laura had chosen for her “children” laid hold upon this narrow-souled trustee. Read? He kept the books at the stable so that no prying eyes might peer and mock—and he encroached upon his fall plowing morning and evening, while he read “Tom Sawyer” and “Black Rock,” which were among Laura's latest additions to her library. “Lies—nothing but lies!” he muttered as he waded through them; but he could not deny that they were most interesting lies! To himself he sneered and mocked at the idea of spending good money on a book case for such an idle investment, and to prove satisfactorily the utter folly of such a proceeding he explored further and further into the despised books. Some of them interested him not at all; yet because all were illustrated, he pored over the pictures. One particularly fine book contained excellent reproductions of certain paintings with explanations of the motive and

meaning of each. Oh Crombie, Crombie! how greatly have you starved yourself—and others—of such food for mind and soul! This book was the undoing of Crombie; it took hold upon him as no spoken argument could have done. It walked with him in his plowing, it toiled with him as he cleaned out his pig pen. For there were two pictures that particularly struck home. One was that quaint and suggestive scene, the "Angelus," depicting the two work-weary peasants bowing reverently at the sound of the bell; the other was a reproduction of the "Man with the Hoe." These were people of Crombie's own world—workers. Distinctions of dress or landscape were unnoticed in the common bond of labor. "By jing!" he said to himself thoughtfully, "work does dry up a man, when he ain't got anything in his life *but* work! I ain't working for the sake o' working—I'm doing it so's to have an easier, comfortabler time some day. Maybe I'll use myself all up, so't when that time comes—if it ever does come—I won't know how to take the good of it! I'll be all bent up an' withered out like yon old fellow with his hoe—Darn! I'd hate to be that way!"

His concern, was purely selfish. He had not yet learned to apply the idea to other lives. He kept that book much longer than usual—so long indeed that Laura grew quite uneasy about it.

"Surely he will return it to-night!" she said to herself finally. "I wish I could just catch him at it! Why not? I will stay in the school all night and take a chance on catching him red-handed!"

She began to form her plans—so intent upon confronting Crombie with an undeniable interest in books that she forgot several rather important points in connection with the affair. That afternoon at four o'clock she sent Mary a note by the hand of Pandora, in which she stated that she was going home with Hannah Harris, and might be away all night. This had happened before, and Mary would be neither surprised nor alarmed. Benjy Harris had gone to town with a load of fat hogs for the butcher, and she was therefore under no apprehension that he would undertake to "see her home" in the evening—which would have spoiled her plan of spending the night in the school.

It was October, and the day had been cool, so she wisely put a solid maple knot into the stove at four o'clock knowing that it would hold fire for hours; otherwise the school room would be a chilly place before long. Then she locked the door as usual and turned down the road towards the Harris home. Mrs. Harris had not expected her, and was in a fine fluster.

"What ever will you think of me, Teacher—not a cake or a pie on the premis-sizes! I declare, if I'd 'a knowed you was coming—Ethel May—couldn't you stir up some drop cakes for supper?"

"Now, Mrs. Harris," said Laura persuasively, "I'm coming right out to the kitchen with you, and I'm going to tell you what to do. I'm tired of being 'company'—I want you to forget all about that! Just sit down in your rocking chair; that's it. Now give me the socks you were mending. You have no idea how splendidly I

can darn socks. I just want you to talk to me, and visit with me. Give me bread and butter and apple sauce for supper—I really enjoy that, and I'm not particularly fond of pie and cake."

So they sat in the kitchen and Laura mended a pair of socks, much to Mrs. Harris' dismay. She felt that she should not have allowed it! Presently Laura drew her on to talk, and the room was soon lively with conversation. Ethel May was anxious to leave the home of her youth and go into service in town. Her mother opposed the idea.

"We need you to home—ain't there enough to do here?" she enquired with reason. "What with Benjy working on the McCoy place, and your father half sick all the time with his back, I don't see how we'd get along to let you go."

"No, I s'pose not," responded Ethel May. "Yet if I went you'd git along without me, you know you would. The other girls went, and earned money o' their own; they have a grand time! But me—I can stay home an' top turnips, an'—an' do *anything!* What kind o' place is this to live in all my life—an' never know nothing only sand, an' stump fences, an' sow-thistle—an' work! Maw, you wouldn't be so cruel!"

Mrs. Harris turned eyes of despair upon Laura. "See? What can I do—what can I say? Yit she's only sixteen—only a child! How can I let her go away among strangers, to face, God knows what of temptations and homesickness?"

"What is it you want, Ethel May? What do you think you would find away from home that you don't find here?"

"What would *you* miss if you was to live here forever?" flung out the girl rebelliously. "You'd miss all the things I want, but I've never had 'em—nice clothes, an' good company, an' amusements—life! I want to have a good time, an' meet with people that know something; an' I want to go to parties an' shows, an' be somebody! Oh, I wish you'd lemme go, Maw!"

"I guess it's the same everywhere, Mrs. Harris. That is what keeps the world moving. The young folks get out away from home and stir around in the world—they get homesick and come back again for encouragement and sympathy. They leave some of their new ideas in the home to keep it alive, and take away with them some of the old well-tried truths that will save them from wandering too far. I guess it is nature, Mrs. Harris!"

"Stay to home this winter, Ethel May," said her mother, after a few moments of troubled pondering, "an' if you want to go in the spring, I won't hold you back. You have a right to have some pleasure in your life, but it's a pity all round that you couldn't find it to home. I dunno what the world is coming to, when all the young folks is leaving the farms! Somebody has to find the food for them, if they won't find it for themselves!"

When the early supper was over, Laura took her departure amid the protests of the whole family. Why couldn't she stay all night? Why couldn't she wait a while, and Benjy would be pleased to accompany her home? But she made them understand that she must go, and that she needed no one with her; it was not dark—

the moon was already white-faced in the evening sky. So she left them, swinging down the road at a good pace, although indeed she was in no great hurry to reach the school. Her plan began to look absurd and—unnecessary. What difference did it make who took the books? If she had paused to think much about it, her impulsive resolution would have melted quite away. Therefore she held it away from her thoughts, concentrating them upon something else—Mary's baby, as it happened. What a splendid child he was, with the fine fluff of wheat-colored hair upon his shapely head!

“Baby with the curls of gold
Where the sunlight lingers—

What next?” she mused. “That is the trouble with making poetry—it just happens the way it happens; no use to try *making* it go any particular way. . . . Well, how is this?

“Baby with the curls of gold
Where the sunlight lingers,
Life and love are never old
Held in baby fingers!

Not bad at all! It is hard to match anything with ‘lingers’. Now for his eyes—

“Baby with the eyes of brown
Fresh from fields Elysian,
You have brought far Heaven down
For our daily vision!

It doesn't seem quite the thing to mix up Heaven and Elysian fields—but it is all the same place after all! One more verse now. . . .

“Baby with the soul of white
Tenderly you teach me—
Draw me upward towards the light
Where God’s voice shall reach me!

They do that, the children! I could feel quite proud of my verses, only I’m sure the same sort of thing has been written—and written to pieces hundreds of times already. I guess mine is as good as most of them—even better perhaps. Maybe I’m cleverer than I think I am!”

She laughed softly over this vague possibility, and went on past the school to her beloved Indian Clearance, where she sat a little while, not thinking but simply dreaming. Darkness was near, however, and she must be at the school in order to catch the book thief, if he came. So back she went, and, having the key, entered calmly in and locked the door after herself.

It was quite dark in the little room, and she could see nothing. She stood very still, listening. Perhaps he was here already! Hush—was that the sound of swift breathing? Did those piled shadows hide a human form? With all her powers concentrated upon sight and hearing, she stood in somewhat panicky silence probing the darkness of the quiet place. Surely something moved yonder—it did! It did! She who had hardly known what fear was, felt it now—for in the heavy enveloping gloom of the room, Something vile, ghastly, loathsome, rushed towards her! She heard the noise of its coming, and paused not to consider what it might be, but sank in terror upon the floor and buried her head in her arms.

The Thing struck upon the wall with a hideous squeak—a bat! How it came to be abroad in October she never knew. Perhaps the warmth of the smouldering maple knot had drawn it forth from its winter retreat to startle the shuddering girl, who crouched upon the floor, scarcely daring to rise lest she draw it back upon her head.

So she remained for what seemed to be hours; then she rose, still trembling, and sat down at one of the desks. Whoever came after the book must certainly have a light, or else he would run chances of taking away some book which he had already investigated. This meant that Laura must have a hiding place if she did not wish to be discovered, and where, in that bare room could she hide herself? Having carefully considered the matter, she decided to seat herself midway in the row of desks next the west windows. At the first sound of an approach, she would slip down between desks and wall, where she would not be seen unless a thorough search of the room was undertaken. She made herself as comfortable as possible, and waited, nervously, apprehensive of every sound which might mean that the bat was astir again. But she heard only the measured ticking of the old clock, the subdued voice of the dying fire, the creaking of the beams as they complained upon their fate, the sighing of the wind in the trees, and the scraping of their branches.

But listen! Was that a footstep? It was, indeed, a very casual foot that took no thought of concealment—for who was there to spy? A window clattered open, and Laura's eyes,

accustomed to the gloom, perceived the darker bulk of a man at the opening, as she slid down to her chosen place. He came in with an assured step, walked over to the desk as one who had been there before, and struck a match. The flame flared up, but his back was towards the girl—she could not tell who it was. Then the bat, much encouraged by the glow of the match, plunged across to get acquainted with the newcomer. Biff! He knocked the match from the man's hand, and straightway there fell upon the darkness a brief but most emphatic word—and Laura knew the voice! Presently another match was lighted, a book was hastily chosen—the match burned down. Yet another one glowed out in the blackness, and the man investigated the time piece on the wall.

"Ten o'clock!" muttered the voice of Crombie, "I'll catch the devil when I get home!" And he departed, caring nothing about the bat. The window rattled shut, the footsteps ceased to sound, and at last Laura rose exultantly. She had caught him—it was only ten o'clock and she would make all speed to the Cowie home. They would be in bed, of course, but she would have no difficulty in getting in. So she let herself out, and plunged into the shadowy, bush-crowded road that led down towards the shore. It was dark indeed! Presently she turned north, her feet making no noise in the heavy sand, when all at once some unaccustomed sound bade her pause. Distinctly, then in the utter silence she heard someone walking quickly. Not Crombie—for she had given him plenty of time to get home, and besides,

this man was coming towards her. She drew back among the bushes, hoping in her heart that she would not be discovered. How could she account for her presence there at that hour of the night.

The man drew nearer, hurrying; he passed her and was gone. She could not tell who he was, nor did she care, being chiefly concerned with her own destination. The light still burned in the Cowie home, much to her surprise, and when she walked into the cheerful kitchen, there was a look of amazement upon the faces of John and Mary.

"Oh Laura, we have been so alarmed about you—weren't we, John?" said Mary, treating her husband, in the stress of her excitement, almost without her customary reserve. "Where have you been, and what has happened to you?" For Laura's black coat and skirt were grotesquely blotched with dust and with whitewash from the wall against which she had crouched. She unfastened her coat carelessly and flung it on a chair, tossing her hat after it.

"Tell me your story first?" she said, patting her hair and brushing somewhat ineffectually at her skirt. "What made you anxious about me? I sent you word that I might not be home tonight—so why did you expect me?"

"Benjy—Benjy!" answered John with solemn promptitude. "When he got home from town and found that you had been so near, and yet were so far, he straightway headed up here, after you. I was at the stable, so he gave me a kindly look first—he does like me anyway. I said 'Hello, Benjy—you brought Miss West

back, did you?' His eyes popped out at me and he said 'No—she come away before I got back from town.' Then he got a little embarrassed and says he, 'I—I just wanted to ask her—you know—if she'd like to go to the Fair next week, so I come up, being as I was all dressed 'n everything.' Now I was so taken up with the idea of Benjy being dressed 'n everything, that I didn't just take in the full force of his remarks about you. But it struck me that if you came away from Harris' before he got home, you weren't wanting to see him, and since you hadn't arrived at the house, my best move was to get rid of Benjy and go and hunt you up. I knew if I said a word to him about it it would be a talk in everybody's mouth by morning, so I just turned it over to myself. I says, 'Oh, I didn't know she was home, Ben. She must have gone right to bed, for I didn't see any sign of her in the house when I came out.' But he wouldn't be discouraged; he stayed and stayed until the chores were done and we went to the house. Mary was in bed then, so Ben just took one look around and went away."

John's eyes strayed to the clock; it was twenty minutes to eleven.

"I got up then and dressed—" Mary took up the tale—"and we have been earnestly talking and wondering. I don't know what we would have done if you hadn't come in. So tell us, Laura—unless it is something you do not care to tell—"

Laura met her gaze frankly, fully aware that they would never doubt her, whether she gave

them her confidence or withheld it. But she was eager to tell, and poured forth her story exuberantly, even to Crombie's remark upon the time. Mary looked at John soberly.

"What a child! Did you not consider how very, very compromising the circumstances would have appeared if he had discovered you there? You put yourself completely in his power!"

"How?" said Laura in amazement. "I found him taking the books from the school—what could he have said about me?"

"Anything he wanted to say," retorted Mary with a frown. "If you heard such a tale about the teacher at Larkin's Corners, you might or might not believe it—but it would not do the girl any good with you, anyway. That is what I mean—talk about a girl always hurts her. You are alone in the world, my dear—you must not give any one a chance to talk about you. More than that, it was the merest chance that Benjy did not find out you were not here. If we had told him that, as in all innocence we might have done—what would have happened? The whole section would have been in an uproar about you at once. Oh, be careful—do be careful when you think of any such unusual action! If we had known what you planned to do, John might have gone with you!"

"That would not give rise to any gossip, you understand," said John with a twinkle, whereat they all laughed a little. But Laura was much disturbed and could not easily shake off the cloud.

"Of course I should have been more thoughtful," she said dejectedly. "I felt quite proud of

myself, and here it seems that I should rather have felt ashamed. Oh well . . . I'm sorry I made you anxious, Mary—”

She kissed her, penitently. John drew down the corners of his lips. “You made me anxious too,” he suggested hopefully. But Laura only gave him a look that quite comprehended his kindly instinct to make her forget her depression. What a husband he would be—if Mary would only let him!

“I thought I had Crombie neatly trapped—thought I could *now* make him do the right thing about the books. But I am not a bit further ahead, am I?”

“Try a little blarney,” suggested John, rising and lighting her bedroom lamp for her. “Offer him one of your most fascinating books to read and suggest that a man of his powerful intellect will readily appreciate the value of such literature and so on. If you come around him carefully and give him a chance to save his face, I believe he will surrender at discretion; but he likes to be important and to rule the trustee-board—teacher too, if he can.”

She took the lamp from his hand. “Thank you—thank you both. I’ll think over your suggestion, John, some other time. I’m pretty tired to-night.”

CHAPTER XXI

DICTATING TO THE TRUSTEES

SHE was still tired in the morning, and depressed greatly in mind. Her grief over her beloved mother, and her pain over Kerry's seeming neglect, had been repressed, held determinedly away from her everyday thoughts and words. Yet they were always at the back of her mind, and sometimes forced themselves out into her consciousness to stab her with memories. For her mother would have understood about Kerry, and would have helped her with loving sympathy and comprehending silence. And Kerry was the only person who might have ceased her grief for her mother, because of his great love for her. Poor Laura! She was learning through heavy trials, that each one of us must bear our own load in this world. Strength was coming to her—slowly. Wisdom was coming too, and a wonderful insight into the lives of those around her. Pain had sharpened her perceptions, and she began to see and grieve for the sorrows and the loneliness of others.

She fed the little pup with new milk, slightly modified. The pup was doing well. It rejoiced in the name of "Mary Ann," which was Benaiah's choice, and was a comfortably plebeian little

cub, with a great deal of voice and very inconsiderable intelligence. It had learned to drink milk from a saucer, and because it slobbered greatly, Laura always fed it out in the woodshed, where the maple chunks and upturned wash tubs cared nothing for a few splatters of milk.

Then she went to school, and at school she found something; Crombie's handkerchief, caught by the descending window as he levanted with a book of *Nature Stories!* It was a gay bandanna, the very banner of the Crombies—he could never deny it, for it seems that once a pedlar had come to Crombie's house and opened out his pack. For three hours—time was nothing to him—he tried to sell Mrs. Abercrombie something, anything, no matter what. But Crombie carried the money and so his wife was safe from the sin of extravagance. The pedlar at last was put to rout by the appearance of the head of the house, and it was presently discovered that he had left a half-dozen of these flaring kerchiefs. Crombie kept them, virtuously declaring they were his by right since the pedlar had had his dinner there, and offered no payment for it.

But now one of them betrayed him. Laura salvaged it, wondering how best to use it against him. At last she went over to her books, and scanned them keenly, examining several, and then discarding them thoughtfully. Finally she selected one called "Canada." It was well illustrated, as indeed all the books were; and it dealt with many of the beauty spots and wonders of our Dominion. Surely Crombie could not deny the value of such a book as that! She put the big

crumpled tobacco-smelling piece of cotton into an envelope, wrapped up the book, and enclosed a note in which she said:

“Dear Mr. Abercrombie:

“I am sending you your handkerchief, which was caught fast in the north-east window of the school. I am also sending you a book which I wish you to look over, as I am sure you will appreciate it, and will see at once how useful such books can be in teaching children what it is only right they should know.

“Perhaps it would be as well to warn you that I shall send in my formal resignation at the end of this month.

“Sincerely yours, LAURA WEST.”

Whatever Crombie thought of all this, he did not say. But he and Ben Harris, Senior, and William Mathers, the third trustee, appeared at the school house the next afternoon, just a few minutes before closing time, and begged her to give them a little of her time. She sat down again at the desk, wearily, having no heart to rouse herself for discussion, argument or decision.

“We come about this here resignation, Teacher,” said Crombie pompously from his place in the visitor’s chair. The other two sat awkwardly upon front seats, which are always reserved in school hours for those ill-behaved rascals who get into mischief when allowed to sit further back. “Now why d’ye want to leave us?”

“Why *wouldn’t* I want to leave you, Mr. Abercrombie? What inducement do you offer that would hold a teacher here?”

“Say now,” he responded warmly, reaching to

his hip pocket for his pipe, knife and tobacco, and proceeding to make a smoke for himself, "We took you on here, didn't we, when you hadn't no experience—ain't that so? We give you a chanct, for a year, an' now you kind o' get up on yourself to quit!"

"You will please not smoke in here," Laura said with determination. He roused an obstinate fighting spirit in her that was greater than her lassitude, and stronger far than his own strength. "I do not think you did me any great favor in taking me for this year. I happen to know that of the other candidates who applied for this school, you had the final choice of nine. Seven of these would not come when they found how far out of the world it was; and the other offer you had was from a girl with no more experience than I had, and with a lower certificate. So I came. You wanted me to take care of the school, sweep it, scrub it, light the fires, clean the stove, and probably split the kindling wood—for one dollar a month extra. It was certainly very kind of you to put this easy money in my way—but I did not take that offer. Now I want to speak my mind for once. I have been here nearly a year, teaching your children. I have done it honestly and well, as your Inspector will tell you. You know it yourselves, anyway, because your children have got along splendidly. But when I ask for any extra equipment, anything to help the children to learn and to grasp the big world which they cannot see—you become misers, who will not spend a penny even for a plain advantage."

She paused and looked upon them despairingly. It was no use to say anything to such men! Mathers was leaning back, vaguely chewing upon a long-suffering straw. He did not care a snap, one way or the other. Mr. Harris was regarding her with such foolish admiration that she turned away her eyes. He was simply impressed by her words, and would quite as readily sway to the voice of Crombie when he spoke.

"And what all do you think you should have for the school?" enquired that individual cautiously. He was not at all minded to let Laura go. "I can't see but what it is all right."

"Can't you indeed! Then go and sit three seats back, and read what is on this front blackboard!"

He went.

"Can't see anything," he muttered, twisting about from side to side.

"No, of course you can't, and it is ruinous to the eyes to try. So there is the first thing needed—dull-finished blackboards, down where the children can reach to work at them. The maps are good, but look at this—" she set forth a small globe on a stand. It was little bigger than an orange. "How can any teacher do good work with a toy like this? And see, gentlemen, here are my books which I have gathered for a little library in the school. They are worth considerable money—don't they deserve something better than to be piled on the floor?"

"Well what use are they to the school—books! They only waste the children's time!" This was the verdict of William Mathers. Laura turned to

him scornfully—but she did not say the words she meant to stay. With an effort she conquered her disgust at his narrowness and ignorance—maybe it wasn't altogether his fault that he was so blind. She set herself determinedly to win him.

"Mr. Mathers," she said earnestly, "if you will only examine some of those books, I am sure you will see how interesting and helpful they are. You men want your children to be clever, and to do things that you yourselves have not had a chance to do. You want them to be leaders in the neighborhood, to be honored and respected for their wisdom and ability. Now it is not easily possible for them to get out into the world and learn for themselves there. No—you must bring the gathered knowledge of others to them—you must give them an opportunity to learn all they can here at home; or you must face the fact that they will go away from you in search of education and experience, unless they are dull and indifferent, in which case they will be content to stay at home and vegetate. It is in your hands—nothing can be done without the help of the trustees. If you earnestly and generously co-operate with your teacher, I am sure you will have no reason to regret it. What difference can it make to your teacher that she should ask this? Is it any personal advantage to her? Not at all. It simply means that she can do better work and do it faster, than she can without."

"That's sense—that's sense!" exulted Mr. Harris who was quite in favor of giving Laura whatever she asked for, providing that Crómbie approved.

"If I hired a man to cut wood for me, it 'ud be to my interest to see he had a good saw—and axe too, in case there was need of it. The Teacher is right, Crombie. Better let her have what she wants."

Crombie considered. "Well—what all d'ye think ye oughta hev? Seeing it's you, an' you *hev* done pretty well with the young ones, we might maybe do something. So what d'ye want us to get for you?"

"Nothing at all—nothing," said the girl, rising from her desk with a gesture of hopeless finality. Her grey eyes were dark with weariness, and her lips drooped. "You need get nothing—for me. I did not ask anything for myself. It is for your children, for your neighborhood, that I spoke. Perhaps your next teacher will be content to scrape along with this sort of thing—" she swept a scornful gesture towards the meek little globe—"Perhaps she may not mind the loathsome bats in the walls, and the clock that freezes up in winter time. She may enjoy hornets' nests in the roof in summer, with flies hurling in through unscreened windows, and a floor that is scrubbed only twice a year! And yet these things might be tolerable if you were not able to do better—but you are able! Think shame to yourselves that you are not willing. This policy of meanness with your schools keeps the better class of people from coming into the country to farm, and it drives away to the city those who are able to go. You will receive my formal resignation as soon as I can write it out—and I hope you will consider well what I have said."

"Resign then, if you want to!" raged Crombie, banging his fist most discourteously upon the arm of the chair. "You won't get any recommend from us, and you'll maybe have your own times getting another school without it. Such talk! Land sakes, what's trustees *for* anyway? You'd dictate and domineer until you'd run the whole section, you would. God help the man that marries you, for you'll talk the ear off his head!"

"God help the woman that married you, if you are as mean with your own money as you are with the school money!" said Laura in white anger—then laughed at the absurdity of wrangling with Crombie. "Don't worry about me, Mr. Abercrombie. I got an excellent recommendation from Inspector Gray, and I have the choice of three schools already. And gentlemen, you want to know the truth about the school, which is your responsibility. I have told it to you as far as I know it—indeed I have. Bruce is a county of pioneers—why should you not be pioneers in educational matters, blazing the trail for others to follow? You see I speak quite disinterestedly—it is for your advantage and for your children. Why should you not launch boldly out and *Be* something!"

She gazed earnestly into their faces, seeking for the responsive gleam which would tell her that her words had gone home. But Crombie had flung himself back in his chair, black with fury. Mr. Mathers was drumming on the seat with idle fingers, and giving an excellent imitation of a heavy thinker. Mr. Harris sat pulling his loose lip and wishing he had a chew of tobacco. So

she left them to finish out their meeting, and trod the well known road to the Cowie home, seeing nothing, knowing nothing, but that she had failed—failed through her own lack of tact and patience. Crombie, the moving spirit, was antagonized. The other two were as wax in his hands.

“If I had just kept myself in control, and worked up to it properly, I might have done something with them,” she thought regretfully, forgetting that sometimes an explosion accomplishes more than might be done in days of patient labor with hammer and chisel.

She had stirred them, and stirred them deeply. Crombie’s wrath was as much resentment for the arousing of his conscience, as anything else. The other men had gained a little light, had felt a new impulse, and would never be quite as indifferent again. Laura told her friends that evening about the meeting and its discouraging result, or lack of result.

“No use, John; you’ll have to get yourself on the trustee board for next year. Then you can begin to do things, and the new teacher will have a chance to do something too.”

“Then you are in earnest about going?” broke in Mary, with distress in her face. “Oh no—stay and go ahead with it, Laura. Fight Crombie down—you have him half beaten already!”

“What’s the use? The fault isn’t so much in Crombie, as in the system which leaves so much power in the hands of men like him. I don’t see why it should be so—and I don’t see what is to be the remedy.” She leaned wearily back in her chair. “I’m sure I don’t feel like accepting

any share of responsibility in the matter, but you know—" her pale face glowed with sudden color— "I—I—hate a quitter! I feel as if I must do something, or my conscience will bite me every time I think of it."

How John laughed! "A quitter! It's a nightmare to you, that idea. But you needn't be afraid—you are the genuine leaven that leavens the whole lump—you are the starter, the encourager, the forlorn-hoper—"

"Don't make fun of me!" she cried out, pitifully. "I couldn't bear it!"

"Never—indeed!" came instantly in response. "Don't think it—I had no such intention! I meant every word. I have only the greatest respect for you and your attitude on this matter—no other teacher hereabouts has ever spoken so, in our hearing."

"They don't seem to bother do they? I wonder why—" mused Mary, looking with deep affection at the girl's slender black-clad figure and serious up-lifted face. Laura had, of late, put away childish things. Grief had made a woman of her. Though her eyes had still their wide innocence and candor, they shone with a Joan-of-Arc expression that told how her soul was growing.

"Because none of them propose to stay in the country a day longer than they have to—that's why," she answered. "They plan to get into a town school, or be married, or something. The girls, I mean, of course. Men—they can always get the better schools, and find less trouble with trustees than girls do. But they are planning

usually for a jump into medicine or law or the ministry—and *they* don't care. When the country people demand something better, they'll get it, no doubt. Trouble is, they don't seem to realize that they need it."

She picked up Cowie Junior and proeeded to get him ready for bed. His smooth firm limbs responded to her gentle hands, and his snuggling head somehow eased the ache in her heart. She loved him so—loved every fat wrinkle, every silken hair, every rosy dimple. His responsive admiration was balm to her tense soul. With him she need not pretend—she need not excuse herself. He yielded her a sympathy and joy that was immeasurably grateful to her.

Insensibly John and Mary were drawing together. They could not be friendly with her, without, in a measure, ignoring the estrangement that had grown up between them, and the atmosphere of the little log house was growing gradually less strained. Laura was doing them good in spite of themselves.

CHAPTER XXII

A HOME ENRICHED BY LOVE

A FEW days later, a bulky letter came for her, and when she opened it she was considerably astonished to find that it contained besides a note from Julia, two other letters addressed in Kerry's well known hand. She dropped it all into her lap for a moment while she fought with the sudden tightness in her throat. Whatever it meant, there would surely be the pain of the re-opened wound anyway. The wonder of two letters from him who had been silent for so long, was deepened by an examination of the post marks. They had been written during August! Exceedingly mystified, she opened Julia's letter. It read (in part) as follows:

"You will see that I am sending you a couple of letters which have been lying in the hall at home for weeks—probably left there before we thought to notify the post office . . . Well dear, I hope it does not matter about them. I am sorry we did not look after them sooner, but we did not know they were there as it seemed none of us could bear to go back to the house when once it had been closed up."

She lifted them with dread, opened them, and read the brief pencilled messages, understanding

now that he had written them in the midst of great pain and weakness. She might have known that he would not fail her—she might have known! Tears came, in a great relaxing of her self restraint. She could let herself think of Kerry now, as she longed to think of him. She blamed her lack of faith in him, and dared not let herself consider how she must have appeared in his eyes when these painfully inscribed missives had received no answer! Hurt and glad, self-accusing, yet happy, she wrote to him a little letter telling him about it—that she had but just received his comforting messages; that she appreciated and treasured them; that she was sorry to have seemed ungrateful. “But indeed (she wrote naively) when I did not hear from you then or since, it seemed that I had lost not only my dear mother but you too!”

John was going to town the next day with the butter and eggs, and Laura gave him the letter to post, being anxious to get it away, and equally anxious to avoid the gossip of the little post office of Andrews’ Bay. Now John was but an average human being, with very human frailties, and it must be recorded in the interests of truth that he put the letter into the inside pocket of his overcoat—and there it remained undisturbed for an unconscionable length of time. Laura, watching and waiting impatiently for a reply, felt the warm glow fade, and the chill of a rebuff settle upon her, as day after day passed and her letter brought no response. He had not cared then? Oh why had she put in that ill-chosen remark about “losing” him?

Her face flushed hotly as she remembered her words, and she came very near to hating Kerry for the slight he had put upon her.

The glorious fall was passing. Wailing November winds haunted the frost smitten country side; grey stubble thrust itself like the unshaven chin of an old man, upon the dreary fields. The bay was lashed by rain and storm, and thundered nightly through the long hours of darkness upon the shore where great boulders marked its rim and logs of driftwood tossed to and fro. The leaden sky and the chilly air told that snow was not far away.

Laura worked away doggedly, calling upon herself for endurance in the sodden rainy days, when the school room was frequently quite too dark for study, and it seemed as though the little forsaken graveyard crowded closer and closer. She played the organ for the Sunday services as always, and was successful in evading John Hayes, until at last one Sunday, he accomplished his desire to speak to her alone. She was walking to the Cowie home after the service. John and Mary had gone to call upon an old friend down the shore road, taking Cowie Junior with them, and she was supposed to be staying to supper with the Harris's. A sick distaste for the society of Benjy had decided her against this—she wanted to be alone.

The young student drove slowly up behind her as she plodded along the road, chilled by the wind from the water.

"Miss West!" he said in a controlled voice, halting the horse. She turned and looked at him,

making no answer. He jumped to the ground.

"Let me give you a lift, won't you? I can take you right to the gate!"

"I think not, thank you," she told him gently, not wishing to be unkind.

"Look at me—you can trust me! I want to speak to you for a few minutes, and I think this is the best way."

She looked at him then, indifferently, and decided to get it over with, whatever it was. He helped her in, tucked the robe solicitously about her, and they started on.

"I want to beg your pardon for the way I acted towards you," he said in a low tone, while his face went very white. It was not an easy thing he had set out to do! "It is no excuse for me to say that my nature is and always has been, violent and difficult to control. You are not like that, and you will not understand. But when I want anything, I want it so greatly, so unreasonably—! And you—"

He paused, and flicked the horse with the lines. She turned her face away in annoyance. It was going to be the same old story over again!

"I cannot work as I should among the people, feeling that there is a lack of harmony between us," he went on, and she was thankful to note that his tone had lost the passionate ring of the moment before. "And the more I think of it the more I realize that I was in fault. I want to make it right with you—will you forgive me?"

"I have not harbored any feeling of resentment, Mr. Hayes, but simply of disappointment. I do not wish to stand in the way of your work

and if it makes it any easier for you to feel that I have no enmity towards you, please be assured that I have long since ceased to think about anything you have done or said that annoyed me."

"I shall not trouble you again with any talk of—of you know what," he said wistfully. "I hope you will let me be your friend, let me be of service to you if possible. If my wild words have shut me out from helping you at any time when you might need me—then I shall indeed be punished. Oh, do you suppose I shall ever learn to rule myself?"

"Who can say!" She was deeply touched by this humility, knowing that it was as sincere as any phase of his strange character. "Sometimes I think you must be a genius of some sort, for you have such a tremendous power of concentration. I believe you have a great—a wonderful career ahead of you! Don't lose it by undervaluing yourself."

His face glowed in response to her words, for he had felt the strange illimitable Power within himself at times, and had feared it. Perhaps—oh perhaps, he might dare to foster it, to give it space to grow and voice to speak with! So he sat, dreaming, silent, while the shaggy little horse jogged on against the wind, and the first drops of the rain struck bitterly against them. At the Cowie gate he halted and helped her out.

"Thank you, Miss West," he said with the same wistful tone, and drove away, leaving Laura inexpressibly touched and relieved. John Hayes had in him the makings of a man after all.

She went into the house, and built up a roaring

fire. Her trunk with a good many of her winter clothes was still at the McCoy home. She had never had sufficient courage to make an opportunity to get it. How ridiculous to be so—chicken-hearted! Yes, chicken-hearted described it exactly. And having reached this conclusion, she fell asleep in front of the fire she had built.

John took her down for her trunk one day after school, and sat in the kitchen talking with Francie while she got it ready. It was cold and cheerless in the "Room." The priceless miniature was gone, and everything wore a dreary, dusty face. Nothing in there reminded her of Kerry—the kitchen had been his living-room, and it was hard to imagine him as he must be now, strong and well, walking about, running up and down stairs—or would his progress be tedious and hold him back to the feeble cane or crutch? She did not know—she only knew that he was started in the right direction anyway.

She opened the bureau drawers and speedily cleared them out, putting everything in a neat pile on the bed. In the small top drawer where she kept ribbons, handkerchiefs and so on, was an envelope addressed in her mother's dear handwriting. The envelope was sealed. Extraordinary! Had she never opened it—never read this letter? The envelope bore a date of the previous June. With trembling fingers she reverently opened it, and although shivering in the chill of the room, sat down on the wide sill of the window to read it. The mystery deepened, for the enclosed pages were in Kerry's writing. He said:

"My dear Girl—

"I found this envelope and am going to use it, for it is decided that we are to leave here tomorrow, and I want you to get a little message from me when you come back after the holidays. I shall not be here then to see you—and I know how I'm going to miss you, for I miss you already. When I seal this up, I can give it to mother to put in your room for you, and it will be quite right. But if I addressed the envelope, she would think it not exactly proper to leave it for you!"

"Shall I tell you what I dreamed last night, That you and I sat in front of the big fireplace and a great log was burning. The light shone upon your face and made it glow like an angel's—" She flung it fiercely to the floor. "Oh you and your letters and your dreams! Shall I never escape from this humiliation—I think I cannot bear it!"

She gathered it up with shaking hands, and because she had no way to destroy it, cast it into the trunk and hurled her belongings in after it.

"Ready!" she called, going to the door; and the men came and carried it out to the wagon. John wondered at the fire in her eyes, but being wise, held his peace, and they drove away leaving the house to its chill and dust and desolation.

"Francie tells me that Kerry is coming back to work the place in the spring. He is doing well, I guess—out of the hospital, gaining splendidly. By the way, where are you intending to spend Christmas?"

"I don't know," answered the girl dully. "Mother always had the Christmas dinner at

home—I don't know where it will be, this year. Perhaps the girls are planning a surprise for me. They have not spoken of it anyway."

"Mary and I have been thinking—if you would stay—we'd like to have you."

"Oh that is kind!" she said gratefully, "but I couldn't. Christmas is a time for being by yourselves—this is your first Christmas with the boy."

"I don't think Mary cares anything about being by ourselves," he answered soberly with eyes that looked at nothing but the high collar top of the harness. "She seems to feel—perhaps I am wrong—but I imagine she feels more *safe* when some one else is near!"

"Safe!" cried Laura, thoroughly startled out of her own absorption. "Why, how do you mean? Safe from what?"

"From me and my demonstrations of affection, I suppose," he answered drily. "What else?"

"But do you ever make any 'demonstrations of affection,' as you call it?"

"I have carefully avoided that sort of thing for a long time."

"Then perhaps the presence of a third person helps her to feel safe from—the lack of it!"

The whip fell with sudden cruelty upon the surprised horse, and it was some minutes before John made any answer.

"Please explain," he asked her, and his face was as impassive as ever.

"I'll tell you what I think, then," Laura said gravely, "I think if Mary doesn't care for you, it's your own fault. You have every chance to

make her care—you are with her constantly, and no one crosses your path. She cannot help but respect you, and I'm pretty sure she can give you all that you ask."

"But—but she turned away from me again, snubbed me, hurt me as much as—oh, I should not say it—"

"Tut! Maybe she didn't feel well—maybe you didn't go about it the right way—maybe you were too easily discouraged!" She waved her hand airily. "You do not expect her to do the love-making, do you?"

"By Jove! That's one thing she shall not have cause to complain of!" He urged the horse along at top speed. "I—if you are right, I've wasted a lot of time!"

Arrived at the house, he took her trunk in for her, and when he came out, she was down at the pump, watering the horse. "Go into the house!" she called cheerfully. "I'll look after Ned!" and she smiled to see him go in and close the door.

He went straight to Mary who was knitting a pair of stockings for Cowie Junior. The fire-light flickered upon the swift needles, upon the proud, sad face, upon the piled masses of hair, upon the handsome baby rolling on a rug at his mother's feet.

John knelt in front of her and laid his great hands upon hers. "Mary—" his voice was low and broken—"forgive me!"

"Forgive you! What should I forgive you?"

"Because I loved you so much that I took you away from your home—yet failed to make you

happy her. I love you now so much that I am afraid to say it, for fear it will displease you.” He paused, almost dreading the verdict he had invoked, but she said no word. A deep tremulous sigh slipped from her lips, and one hand went to his hair, where it lay lightly, caressing. The old clock ticked contentedly and the baby, clutching with unsteady hands at his father’s coat, dragged himself upright with a crow of intense delight.

“I think,” she said at last in a half-whisper, “that if I heard you say that again I might begin to understand you!”

“Mary!” His arms encircled her and gathered the tottering baby into the mighty embrace. “Mary—my wife—I love you—I love you!”

They were very merry at the supper table that night, with a gaety which was the natural reaction from months of coldness and repression. Laura was happy in their happiness, hiding her own little ache carefully from view, rejoicing in the harmony that dwelt once more in this quiet home. John told his best stories in his best manner, and everybody laughed, even Cowie Junior, who even went so far as to mark his approval by beating hilariously with his spoon upon his granite plate. The cloud had lifted and the world was fair and sunny once again. When John spoke his eyes sought Mary’s, and hers met them with the clear, frank gaze of one who *knows*. They spoke of common things, flinging about them the mantle of their own deep joy. One could picture no more inviting atmosphere than that of a home so enriched by love.

At last the meal was over. John pushed back his big armchair and regarded the others very comfortably.

"Is Benjy coming to-night?" he asked, for no particular reason, as Benjy came almost every night. Laura flushed.

"For if he's coming," John went on, "it would be a kindness to put a cushion or two in the wood-box. Query: why does a young man in love choose to sit in the wood-box?"

"Did you sit in the wood-box, John?" Laura thrust at him, rather nettled.

"Not a bit of it. I sat on the kitchen table. But you have not answered me. Why does a—"

"Oh don't. It doesn't matter, for he's not in love. What a silly notion! He just comes—he comes—"

"Exactly. He comes; and as he never came until you came, it seems only fair to conclude that he comes on your account. He's a pleasant, decent, honest fellow, but it makes me uncomfortable to see him perch himself on those rough maple blocks—Say Laura, do you like him?"

"Oh yes," the girl admitted, "I never paid any particular attention to him, but I guess he's all that you say. Only—sometimes he makes me very weary! I never know what to say to him, and I positively refuse to be left to entertain him."

"But that's not right. When a young man comes to see you, you must 'sit him up.' Didn't you know that?"

"John," broke in Mary's gentle voice—"John!"

The mild reproof, the reminder of his own new

happiness and its obligations to others, brought his eyes to hers in full understanding.

"You shall not be troubled with Benjy's attentions, Laura," she went on, much to the girl's relief. "Moreover, it is not right to encourage him in any false hopes. When you feel ready for bed, take your lamp and go. He will quite understand. Now tell us, do you intend to have a school concert at Christmas time?"

"I hadn't thought of it. There are so few children old enough to take part—no, I rather think I won't try it."

"We had a teacher here one time," John said with his eyes on Mary as she swiftly gathered up the supper dishes and set away the food into the pantry, "and this lady was a very quiet little person, called Eliza Land. She undertook to get up a concert, and as the scholars were few, the young people of the neighborhood were asked to help. They asked their friends too, and the result was that on the night of the entertainment there were Scotch dancers from Cape Chin, and a concertina player from Tobermory; a young lady who recited came all the way from Lion's Head and twin brothers were there with duets, from Sauble. The concert lasted until one o'clock in the morning; there was such a crowd that the windows were opened to let those outside hear what was going on. Blocks of wood were carried in from the woodshed and people sat on them until the wood pile was exhausted. Those who had volunteered their services, but were omitted from the program because they were too late in arriving, or in handing in their names, almost

came to blows on the road out in front of the school. More than that—”

“John, John, I’m afraid you are romancing. Hadn’t you better get your chores done before it gets late?”

He laughed in joyful acquiescence, tossed the drowsy baby above his head, then laid him in Mary’s arms. He dragged on his coat, lighted the lantern, seized the milk pail, then stooped above his wife and kissed her—not passionately, but as one who had the right and rejoiced in it.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL

IT was the last day of school. Snow lay deep upon the ground, obscuring the landscape, and muffling the air with its downfall. The examinations had been set and written upon, and on this last afternoon Laura announced the results, commended those who had succeeded in gaining their promotion to a higher class, and condoled with those who had failed to do so.

The school room was decorated with cedars; they framed the windows and blackboards, and stood like great ferns, in the corners. Behind the organ was the Tree, very small but very important, and at last, when three o'clock came, it was revealed in all its beauty. There were strings of pop corn of course, and oranges. There were little stockings filled with much-desired "store" candy, and Laura had provided for every child a book suited to the age and attainments of the recipient. Books were a passion with her—she longed to give these well-loved pupils of hers a key to that unfailing treasure house wherein is gathered the wealth of all ages, all nations.

They were alive with excitement, for a Christmas Tree is always a wonderful thing under any circumstances. It was quite a long business to

distribute the gifts, for discipline was relaxed, and formality was banished. In their delight and evident enjoyment Laura quite forgot herself. She laughed and joked with them, explaining, questioning or simply standing in glad silence while they revelled in their gifts. When Pandora came up in answer to her name, she thrust a tiny parcel into Laura's hand. "For You!" she whispered, and watched eagerly while it was unrolled. It was a rather soiled square of cotton, laboriously hemmed with uneven stitches, and obviously intended for a handkerchief.

"For me! You darling!" cried Laura with sudden tears. She bent and kissed the face of the child, as she placed the little rag inside of her blouse. "I shall use it, dear, and it will make me think of you. Thank you!"

Pandora, much elated, gathered up her own effects and returned to her seat. The things that were given to her were of small value in her eyes compared with that which she had given away. The other children also presented their little offerings, inexpressibly dear to Laura because of the love they showed. Benaiah had surpassed them all, however, for he had made a book for her. The covers were about three inches wide by four inches long, and they were of thick velvety birchbark. The book itself contained one poem—this:—

"We have a lovely teacher
And she is going away
I wish she would stay
At Andrews' Bay.

"She is always kind
But if children don't mind
Sometimes she's a little bit cross
She has to be the boss.

"I know I'll be lonely
All the time I'll miss her
And I would like to kiss her."

Laura read it aloud, tremulously, touched to the heart.

"You have made me very happy, dear," she said to the boy, whose uplifted face shone with adoration. "And you have made a very good poem, for it says exactly what you wanted it to say! I don't know how you ever came to think of such nice things!"

There was no formal presentation to her of any community gift, but nothing could have equalled in her esteem these simple tributes of her children. They gave themselves with their gifts—dear eager little souls! They said goodbye to her presently, crying a little as they leaned against her. She gathered them into her arms and made them understand that she was proud of them and loved them everyone that they could make her happy in days to come by studying faithfully and building upon the foundation which had been her work during this year; that they must consider her as their friend and let her know at any time if she could be of service to them; and finally she promised to write to each child as soon as she was settled in her new school.

"And now go, children. I must look over the

register and see that everything is right," she said, with a feeling that she could not stand much more of this.

They filed out, muffled up in wraps and burdened with lunch boxes, and from the window she watched them out of sight, before returning to the register for the final balancing of accounts. Total attendance—average attendance—number of days taught— She went over it twice for the sake of accuracy, and at last with a sigh, closed the book and leaned back in her chair. What a quaint old school, with its tiny windows, its low ceiling, its whitewashed walls, and its dingy old-fashioned desks! Bats in the walls—clock that froze up in cold weather—oh what memories clung about this ancient place! She rose and went softly from desk to desk, bidding farewell to the inanimate wood, to the room where she had fought so many battles, learning patience and forbearance, and forgetting herself in the needs of others.

Her face was wistful as her eyes fell on her pile of books, some on the shelf, some on a chair beneath it. She had failed there, completely—the trustees were even more opposed to books as an aid to education, than might have been the case if she had never mentioned them!

It is rather a pity that she could not have seen Crombie at that particular moment, for it would have given her great satisfaction. It was just because he grudged her that satisfaction that the small-souled gentleman in question had kept his intentions to himself, for he bore a grudge towards her and did not want her to know that

he had decided upon the very thing she most desired of him.

He was standing in the chief furniture store of the little town across the peninsula and he harangued the weary clerk after the manner of one to whom Solomon in his wisdom was as water unto wine.

"Something pretty nifty, son," he demanded, setting his old fur cap upon the back of his head. "We want the best of everything for our school, and by Heck we get it too! This here Bruce county is a county of pioneers, and we're the cream of them in school affairs. over to Andrews' Bay. If you're there any time, just drop in an' see our library—it's a little bit the best rural school library in this peninsula! That's what I want the book case for, so show me what you've got, for if you can't suit me, I'll have to send to Toronto!"

It was coming, the attitude she had longed and worked for, but never would Crombie allow to her or to anyone but himself, the credit for its inauguration. Recognizing the truth of her words, he had come in time to claim them as his own, and to act accordingly. Laura had not failed after all!

She locked the school, and went slowly out into the white-robed evening. It was dusk, nearly five o'clock, and a storm-presaging wind drove the snow heavily from the west. The going was tedious; she felt weary, and very desolate, for she had now no mother to welcome her home from her pilgrimage, and that is a forlorn state of affairs. Cutter bells sounded behind her, and

presently the voice of John Cowie invited her to ride the rest of the way. John too, had information that he might have given her to her comfort, seeing that he had that morning in town discovered the long-neglected letter which she had handed him to post in November! It was on its way to Kerry by this time, however, and John had forgotten it again in the pressure of trouble which advertised itself upon his usually calm face.

"I need your help," he said abruptly as he tucked the robe around her, and started the horses on again, at a good pace, for he was invariably a fast driver. "Mary's father is at death's door at Cape Chin—pneumonia. If Mary wants to see him, she must not lose an hour!"

"Oh poor Mary! Of course she must go! But you won't let her take Junior?"

"No—no, she must not take him; that is where I want your help."

"Oh, he will be quite content with me, and never miss his mother."

John looked gratefully down at her. "Thank you," he said simply. "He won't starve, I suppose?"

"Starve? No. of course not! Why, he could live on his surplus tissue for a week, like a camel on its hump! He's perfectly healthy and if he won't eat porridge and bread and butter, I'll kill a chicken for him. He will soon be nine months old, and has six good teeth—it is time he learned to eat. He and I will have a splendid time."

"Listen then," said John briefly. "Thomas Law

—I saw him—he is coming in the morning to feed the cattle and horses and water them. He will see about firewood and water for the house, and do anything you want done. You are on no account to attempt anything at the stables. I shall come back without delay you may be sure. I wish I had time to arrange for some one to stay with you—send Thomas for one of the Harris girls if you like—”

“Oh no. That would spoil it. Junior and I will be perfectly happy by ourselves, except for Mary’s anxiety of course. I’m not a nervous person you know. I don’t mind being alone.”

He smiled a little grimly, recalling the night when she spent so many hours at the school in catch the book-thief. Indeed she was not nervous!

Arriving at the house, he swiftly put the horse into the stable, and fed him. He knew it would be an hour at least before they could be on their way, and it was. Mary rebelled stubbornly at the thought of leaving Cowie Junior. She clung to him passionately. “I must have him, John! Oh, if father should—die, I must have my baby! And he needs me, indeed he does—I cannot leave him—you shall not make me leave him.”

John was distinctly troubled. He disliked to exert his authority, for he had only so very recently learned the sweetness of Mary’s love that he trembled at the risk of losing it again. Laura solved the problem by drawing Mary to the kitchen door. “Look!” she cried, flinging it open, so that the whirling snow flashed whitely into the room, “Would you take your baby out in that, simply for your own wish, that you

might have something to cry over, in case you have to cry? Let the youngster stay where he is safe and warm, and do you get your wraps on, and hurry away to your father!"

So it was Laura who made her drink a cup of tea and eat a morsel of food. It was Laura who heated maple blocks and wrapped them up to keep Mary's feet warm on the long journey. It was she who packed the little satchel, and brought forth the wraps and bundled her closely in them, forgetting nothing. At last they were gone into the storm and darkness of the winter evening, and she and Cowie Junior were quite alone.

"You must be fed, young man, and go to bed," she admonished him, and he heard her with round eyes of interest. She took a bit of bread on a saucer and soaked it with boiling water. When it was cool she trimmed it with cream and sugar and approached him ingratiatingly. "Goodies!" she said, by way of encouragement, and offered him a taste. He lunged forward eagerly—and the spoon spun from her hand, striking with a surprising clamor upon the floor at the other side of the room.

The baby broke into delighted laughter, in which Laura joined, and then the trouble began, for that blessed baby was so enchanted by the success of his first manoeuvre that he quite refused to consider the bread and milk except as an excuse for jingling spoons upon the floor. When, after a lapse of quite ten minutes, she finally persuaded him to take a substantial mouthful, he showed his unmistakable disapproval by

promptly drooping his lip and allowing it to slide forth and fall upon her dress.

"Baby!" said Laura, aghast. But Baby heeded not her remonstrances. He drank plentifully of water and seemed well disposed towards the world in general and herself in particular, so that she concluded to put him to bed and trust that his appetite might be more noticeable by morning. He submitted pleasantly enough to his disrobing, and at last when she put him into her bed, he thrust his fat thumb into his mouth in a way that strongly indicated peaceful slumber. She drew the door almost shut, and went back to the table in the big comfortable room, where the remnants of the supper demanded her housewifely care.

She washed the dishes, and swept the floor, cheerfully happy as she had not been for weeks. There is truly something about the care of a house and a baby that tends to make a woman as she worked, and sang thereto some words of her own gathering:

"The Herald of the Northland
Trumpets loudly from the hill;
And all the little cedars
Shiver—quiver—and are still!
The snow comes sifting—drifting—
Through the endless night of storm,
And children cuddle closer
In their beds, to keep them warm!"

Peeping in at Cowie Junior, she was dismayed to behold him with his plump shanks waving in the air, and a liberal supply of bedclothes

upon the floor. He chirped a welcome to her, but she somewhat severely laid him down in his place and bundled him up with blankets again. Broad awake, perfectly good-natured, he submitted to her ministrations, but as she turned to go out he simply raised all his limbs with one ecstatic motion and let the quilts go where they would. Then he fixed an eye on her and remarked casually, "Wah!"

Laura was not without resources. She took a small blanket and rolled the youngster firmly up in it, and secured it about him with all the safety pins she could muster. "Now baby dear, go to sleep!" she enjoined, and went back to her housekeeping rather more doubtful of her ability to deal with him. She hummed softly:

"In all the whirling, skirling night
 No menace is, nor dread,
For little children, mother-kissed
 And warmly tucked in bed.
So older folk with cheerful hearts
 Shut out the frost and din,
And know that Love leans through the storm
 And gently tucks them in!"

It was eight o'clock—and a long time until daylight. Something made her think all at once of the cow—it had not been milked! As there was only one cow milking it was exceedingly necessary for the baby's sake that she should be attended to, and with this thought in mind Laura rose quietly and lighted the lantern. She swathed herself in a coat of John's and put his cap upon her head. Pail in hand, she turned

towards the stable, to milk the all important cow, but not before she had assured herself by careful listening, that the baby was at last asleep. To be sure, John had given her careful instructions to leave stable chores alone, but that disturbed her not at all! He might have known that she would pay no attention to a command that did not impress her as reasonable.

In the stable she felt a curious sensation of crowding shadows, dark corners, hidden perils, for this was alien territory. Moreover she had not the slightest idea which cow of the three was to be milked. Hanging the lantern upon its hook, she regarded the animals carefully. They chewed away at their unspeakable cuds and returned her gaze with contempt.

"I'll try every one of you," she announced firmly, laying aside coat and cap and pushing up her sleeves from her wrists. "Yes sir, I'll try every one of you, if you don't speak up and say who is to get the preference."

As she stood watching them, a strange thing happened. The black cow, with much deliberation, folded her knees and closed herself up like a jack-knife, and lay down with a most unmannerly grunt, to be followed with no loss of time by the mooly who stood beside her!

"Splendid!" cried Laura. "Who says that cows have no intelligence? Now I know it must be you, White-face. Stand over, like a darling, while I try my 'prentice hand on you!"

White-face accommodatingly stood over, and Laura sat down beside her and proceeded to the attack. She had tried to milk once or twice

before, but had always been assured of some one else to finish what she left. This time, however, the responsibility was upon her, and she assumed it bravely. For twenty minutes of actual time she strove valiantly with the amazed cow, and results were most discouraging, as viewed in the pail, although the cow offered no remontrance whatever.

"Cow," Laura said appreciatively, "You are doing the best you can—you are a pretty decent citizen, and some day I'll commemorate your virtues in suitable verse. Just in a minute, when the cramp goes out of my hands, I'll try you again. Surely I am as good a performer as most people who milk cows—they had to learn sometime! Well, here goes!"

In course of time she came to the conclusion that she had done all she could, therefore she piled every manger generously with John's good clover hay, and splashed straw along halls and passages in a fashion which would have given that tidy man the shivers. She knew that horses ate oats, but not being aware how much made a meal, she contented herself by tossing in a gallon for each of them, and hoped they would not starve before morning! And so, having bedded every beast to its knees and dazzled it with provender, she left the stable with her lantern and milk pail, and returned to the house. And then she thought of the baby! The things which that child could do were quite beyond human reckoning. How often she had laughed at Mary's tales of his escapades, for what could a baby, not nine months old, do in defiance of an adult?

She began now to understand a little the great responsibility imposed in the case of a child of that age. She had petted and played with him by the hour, but never had felt the burden of his entire care.

She opened the door upon a house of reassuring silence, and stepping in, closed it lightly behind her. Then "Wah!" said the cheerful cherub, and Laura's heart sank with apprehension, for the sound did not come from her bed. Cowie Junior had somehow descended in an avalanche of quilts to the floor, and despite safety pins and encircling blanket, he had wormed himself out into the room and anchored not two yards from the fireplace. She tossed aside the coat as she ran forward to clasp him in her arms.

"Oh Heavens, baby, the fire! No wonder your daddy told me to stay away from the stable! You precious, preeious boy—I was wrong to leave you! Never mind, Aunty won't do it aden, dear. 'Ere, cuddle down 'ums' 'ittle head, an' do to seep; bress ums heart—"

And more of the same. Presently he obliged her by putting down his head and closing his eyes, as though sleep was his chief desire. Gently she laid him in the bed with a sigh of genuine relief. As soon as she had washed the milk pail, and built up a good safe fire, and locked the doors, she crept into bed beside him and soon fell into a troubled sleep. Any one who can recall the novelty of a night with another person's wakeful baby—and a winter night at that—will understand how fagged and wretched Laura felt when with daylight, Cowie Junior who was inex-

tricably tangled up in the sheet, with his feet upon her chest and his head apparently under his arm, resigned himself to sweet slumbers. He had not cried—oh no. But he had repeatedly and determinedly cast the bedclothes from himself and insisted upon crawling to the foot of the bed in spite of her best efforts to keep him warmly covered and in the residential part of it. She got him a drink at midnight, and he ungratefully splashed it upon her bare feet. The clock was striking three when in despair she went to the pantry and got him a biscuit. The things he did to that biscuit were a nightmare. For he stroked her face with it, and thrust choice morsels of it into her hair. He chewed upon it disparagingly, and then in disgust smote it upon the wall. When it was sufficiently punished, and the bed was well strewn with crumbs, he cast aside the remains with all the strength of his good right arm, and succeeded in finding her left eyelid with it.

Therefore when at last he dirfted into a promising nap, she rose and dressed herself. It was time to be up anyway. She built up the fire again and opened the doors to air the house. It was a wild stormy morning, and the snow circled in about her feet. How long would it take John to go to Cape Chin and back again? She had not the slightest idea, except that she did not expect him back under thirty-six hours at best. For it was storming, the roads would be heavy, and one must make allowance for possible accidents.

CHAPTER XXIV

LOVE'S ETERNAL TRUST

SUCH a long, slow, empty day! Thomas Law, arriving about nine o'clock, offered his small stock-in-trade of conversation, and helped to break up the morning. During the afternoon she played the organ, mended those of her garments which offered an excuse for the attention, frolicked with the baby, and watched the clock. At last came darkness again and Thomas Law to do the evening chores. It had not occurred to her to warn him about letting the neighbors know she was alone. He had mentioned the fact casually to Benjy; therefore, on this second evening that sprightly youth appeared to cheer her solitude.

"All alone, eh?" he remarked, somewhat superfluously. She was very glad to see him, for he was an honest soul and at times very drolly entertaining.

"Now this is nice, Ben!" she said, with satisfaction. "I'm getting so tired of being alone—it's dreadful!"

"What'd you do if you was married, and had to live here, like Mrs. Cowie? Would you git queer, like her, an' hate it?"

"Oh, Ben! She's not queer. She is very

quiet, but I don't think she hates it. No doubt she *was* lonely, for a time," mused Laura. "If I had to live here, I would have duties to occupy me, and a future made of them, to plan and to work out. But now—I hardly dare go out for a pail of water! That baby knows all the tricks there are!"

"Ain't he the cunnin' little rascal, though?" Benjy came over and stood beside her. Cowie Junior lay upon her lap, cherubic in his white night clothes, and small white blanket. Ben extended a finger, thick, red and rough.

"Oh, don't put your finger in his mouth! He is getting teeth and the little gums are so tender."

"Pshaw!" he said with reproach. "Did you think I was so ignorant as to put my great awkward finger in that little fine mouth? I'd be scart, I sure would! How do you do with him, rock him to sleep, or what?"

"Dear me, no! Nobody rocks babies to sleep now-a-days! Mrs. Cowie just lays him in the bed, and lets him go to sleep himself. But," she spoke with some misgivings, "he—he doesn't do that for me. He crawls around in the bed and rolls out on the floor, and does everything one could think of!"

"Blame if he ain't a smart little feller! You'll have to rock him awhile, won't you?"

"Well, I'll try," she consented doubtfully. "Play your mouth organ, Ben, and that may hush him off. He won't go to sleep if he knows it, but he may get around it that way."

So Benjy brought forth his trusty mouth organ, tried a few preliminary notes, and settled down

to business. Half closing his eyes, and billowing out his cheeks, cupping his hands about the small instrument and beating time earnestly with his foot; thus he sought out the airs he knew and loved. "Coming through the Rye;" "Pop Goes the Weasel;" "Turkey in the Straw," and a dozen other ancient melodies, came forth at his command. They rang and echoed in the shadowy room, calling back to that low log-built home the ghosts of pioneer men and women, who had in years gone by, lightened their heavy labor and restricted lives by many a merry dance; old fashioned reel, heavy clog or woven square dance — Benjy drew them back with his rollicking strains.

Presently a pair of drowsy lids fell over the baby's eyes. Laura waited long enough to be sure that sleep had established itself, and then she softly laid the little chap in the bed. Dear little rosy hands, be at rest for a few hours! Soft dimpled body, sleep through the time of darkness! Instinctively she dropped on her knees at the bedside and breathed a tiny prayer for the well-being of the child. Then quietly back to Benjy.

She found him ready to depart.

"Goodbye, Teacher. I won't likely see you again afore you go. I hope you have all the luck in the world in your new school. Don't forget old friends here."

"You may be sure I shall not!" she answered warmly. "Thank you for your good wishes. I shall try to stop on my way to town, when I go, and say goodbye to your father and mother.

They have been most kind to me."

There was a pause, while he wrung her hand with a grip almost painful to her.

"Goodbye, Teacher," he said again, and she answered wistfully, "Goodbye!"

She was alone, and very lonely. The house was still, with an emptiness that could be felt. It was only half past eight, too early to go to bed, although she was weary; for there were eleven hours of darkness yet ahead of her, and she was not weary enough to sleep eleven hours. Taking a cushion or two she lay down upon the bench at the side of the fire place, and watched the flames idly. What a long year it had been! So much crowded into it, so much grew from it; she felt as if all the years of her life had combined in those twelve wonderful months to make it a time she would never forget. The lamp grew dimmer and dimmer, but she did not notice it. The maple log burned down and lay a gleaming mass of coals in the wide fire place, but her eyes were closed and she slept quietly. . .

Bang! A sharp noise brought her to her feet, startled, confused, and trembling with chill and the sense of sudden alarm. The room was in darkness, the fire almost dead, and she hardly knew where she was. Bang-bang! came the noise again. Some one was rapping at the door. Who could it be? Surely not John Cowie—he would not need to rap at his own door—

She fumbled with cramped fingers at the fastenings, and at last flung it open. A man was there upon the step, unrecognizable in the dim starlight. The two stood silently gazing at each other,

until the maple log could endure it no longer, and broke in two with a momentary glow that illuminated both faces.

"Laura!"

"Kerry!"

She drew back involuntarily, only half convinced. He followed, and closed the door. Producing a match, he struck it and advanced to the lamp.

"Dry! Where's another lamp, Laura?"

"Here. I'll light it."

They stood once more in silence staring at each other with eyes that could not believe. Could this be Kerry who had been used to spend his days in a wheel chair, helpless as a child? The face had the old stamp of mental power, but emphasized now by physical strength—and established manly beauty. It was Kerry, as she had dreamed that he might be—Kerry come to his own, at last! She drew a long sigh, and fell to shivering in spite of herself.

"Not cold, surely?" He was all concern, and took her over to the fire place while she trembled all the more. "Did I frighten you, pounding on the door as though I were driving nails? Let me fix up the fire for you—it is rather low. A bit of cedar, a nice juicy old pine root, and this little piece of oak—you'll be toasting in half a jiffy!"

"I—I was asleep—" she faltered, in explanation; then as her eyes took in the miracle of his activity, his splendid height and supple manhood, she broke forth—"You can walk, can't you!"

"Oh, yes—walk like anything! Mother cried

when she saw me at it the first time, but I have improved since that sorrowful effort."

The fire responded to his hands, and leaped up gloriously in the comfortable shadowy room. "It's homelike, a place like this, isn't it?" he went on, answering the thought in her glance. "A home must have memories, and quiet places, and happy places—Could you be happy in a humble home like this Laura?"

"I have been very happy here—" she answered with a swift gasp, drawing back a little, as if in dread of what he might say next.

"It's a lot to ask of a girl, raised as you have been—but if you care enough—do you care, Laura?"

She turned her face away in distress, and did not answer.

"I think you do, don't you?" he asked gently.

"You take a great deal for granted, surely—?"

"How do you mean? You let me tell you at midsummer that I loved you, and I do not think you would have—let me do that, if you had not felt the same towards me. Of course I know you did not answer my letters—"

"But I did—it was you (her face flamed) who did not answer mine!"

"Laura! Didn't you get the note I wrote you after your mother—?"

"Yes—last November. And I sent you a reply at once. The letters were put under the door of the empty house—"

"I see—the postman didn't know you were gone?"

"No. When the girls finally went to close up

the house, they found them, and sent them on to me."

He considered deeply. "But your answer?"

She shook her head. "I gave it to John to post last month," she told him.

"Then I'll guarantee our friend John has it in his pocket yet," Kerry said with a laugh. "No wonder you felt out of humor with me! Well, now that we have settled all that, what about the main question—could you care enough for me to live in the old house yonder with me? I can offer you more than the ordinary farm life, Laura. I have gone in for a Veterinary course, with excellent success, so far, and this is a corner of the world that offers any amount of practice for the profession. Will you let me look forward to a time when we can start in together? For I love you, dear. I think I have loved you since the very first time I saw you."

"That's what they all do!" she cried out, passionately, "every one of them!"

"Well—" said Kerry in mild surprise, "I can't say that I blame them!"

"All the teachers, I mean," she explained, ruffling her hair with quick nervous fingers.

"Yes? But you can't accept them all!"

"Oh, don't be so provoking! I mean that the teachers leave teaching—leave the schools to look after themselves, and they get married!"

"And why not? Which seems the more natural destiny for a nice, reasonable, lovable kind of girl—to be married and live her life out with the man of her choice, or to spend her declining days teaching—let us say—Algebra, to a bunch

of youngsters that hate the very sight of it?"

His eyes twinkled, but Laura was utterly serious.

"You may laugh as much as you like, Kerry, but just the same I think it is time somebody took more than a passing interest in the school question I have been thinking it over, and talking it over with John and Mary, and it seems such a hopeless muddle! Every teacher knows how far below the needs of the pupils is the work of the country school. There is no use in trying to train the mind of a child when his body is starved, or abused, or diseased."

His eyes opened in astonishment. "The country children are not like that, surely?"

"Aren't they though! There are Conover's little fellows—consumptive enough to poison all the section! There are Mr. Mather's children, starving, literally starving, on lunches of—what do you suppose? fat salt pork sandwiches, mince pie, and pickles!"

"Bless me!" he ejaculated, in genuine interest. "Can't they eat it?"

"Eat it—of course they eat it!" she said with scorn. "But what sort of food is that for Third Class pupils?"

"You've got me, there," he made answer. "I don't know."

"No, but you'll know all about diets and rations for colts when you get through your course—why are people so careful about animals and so reckless about children?"

He shook his head. There were other subjects of more interest to him.

"When children can't go home for their dinners, their dinners should be prepared for them in school—hot, inviting and wholesome. Oh they need it so much, especially in cold weather when they have so far to come through the snow drifts—And the little Conovers should have attention, and be kept away from other children. . . Still they have a right to an education too."

"And do you think it is your duty to devote yourself to this work of reform?" he asked critically, while a puzzled line drew down between his dark brows. She had grown so wonderfully in these few months—had become so much a woman, of deep and noble purpose, that he was almost afraid of her! Her face paled at his words, then flushed brightly.

"I would not be so self-conceited," she answered modestly. "But it seems that the teachers drop teaching for some other profession, or get married, or do something, and there is nobody to care a button what becomes of the school."

"And what about the trustees? It really does look like their business."

"Wouldn't you like something to eat?" she asked with swift irrelevance. "I'm hungry, and your remark about trustees makes me faint!"

"Why?" he laughed.

"Why? Well—do you see any sign of reform or progress in such men as Mr. Mathers, or Mr. Harris, or Crombie—and he's the most energetic of the three."

"I do not," he confessed, watching her with caressing eyes as she moved about the room, spreading the cloth upon the table, and laying

places for two—an intimate, pleasant, peaceful sight for any man to behold.

"But outside of this burden on your conscience, this thing you must do, is there really any reason why you can't consider marrying me?"

She drooped her head, not answering. He crossed to her side as she stood at the table, and grasped her hands firmly in his own.

"Do you not know, foolish child, that I only long to help you in every blessed thing you want to do? I love you for your wild quixotic plans of missionary work in rural schools—because it's part of you, dear. But you must give me an answer, for John and Mary will soon be here. Mary's father was only at Crimson Valley, seven miles north, and not nearly as sick as they feared—so I heard in town as I came through. So tell me, Laura, tell me."

She twisted about in his grasp. "Eat your supper, and don't be impatient," she advised, turning her face away from him, while the pulses thundered in her ears.

"I have been patient long enough," he made reply. "Now I will know. Tell me, do!"

"There's the kettle boiling over—let me go!" she cried, but yet she did not try so *very* hard to get away.

"I'll never let you go! The kettle may boil its old head off!" he declared masterfully. "Tell me, Laura!"

"I have told you — a great many things, already!"

"But not the one thing I want to know," his voice was very gentle. "See, dear. I—I have no

right to hold you against your will—I long for your answer—must I beg?"

He dropped her hands, and waited, all his heart in his eyes. She swept him a glance of surprise and amusement.

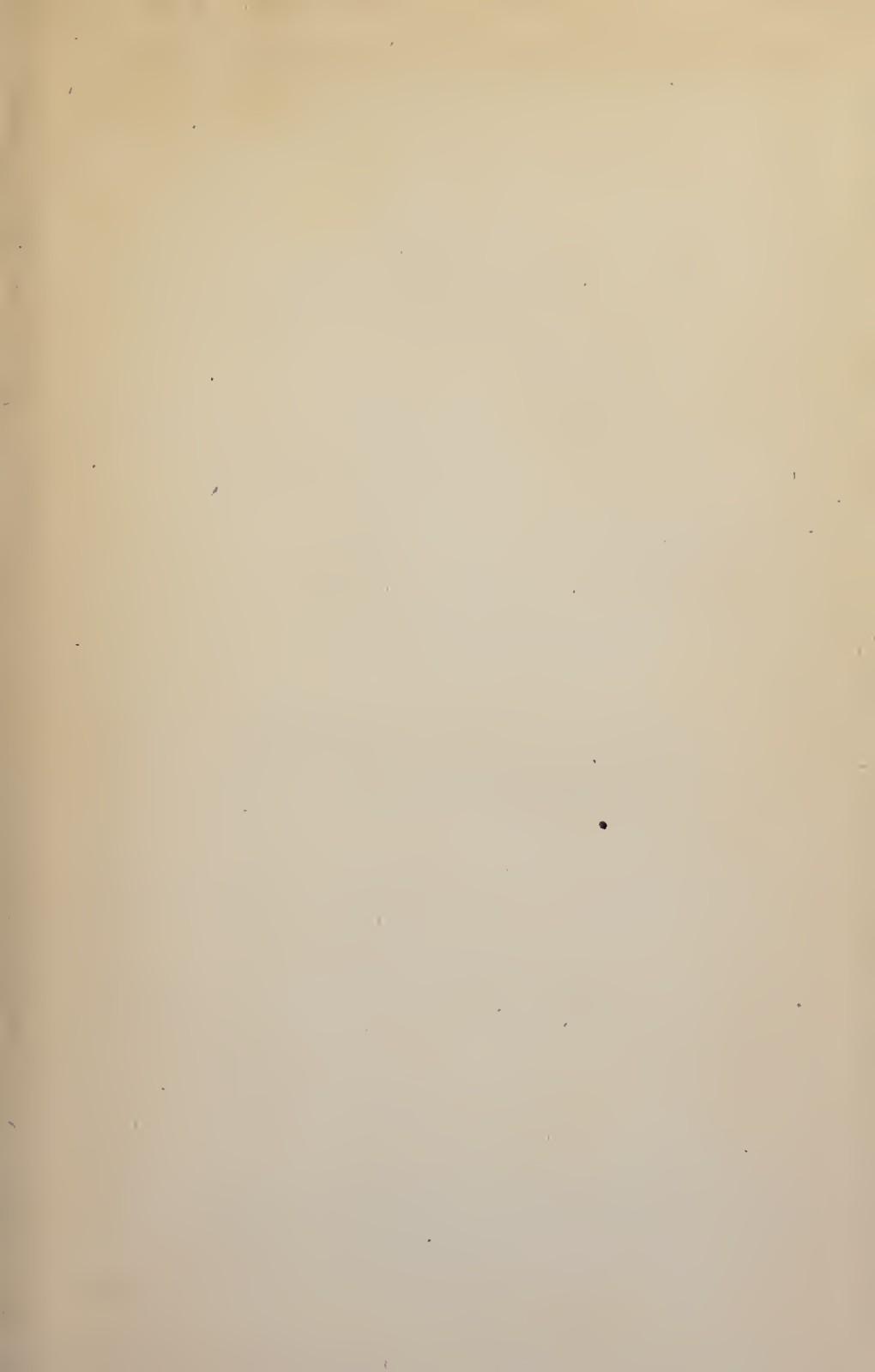
"How could I think anything of so changeable a man?" she said demurely. "First you say you'll never let me go, and then, the next instant you release me, quite as if you enjoyed doing it!"

"You can afford to be generous, my girl," he whispered, still waiting. "You can trust me."

"Ah, yes," she said with a sigh of ineffable content, bravely lifting her face to his, while the kettle bubbled fiercely, unheeded. She placed a hand upon each of his cheeks, and so stood, looking into his soul. "Yes, I can trust you, in all things. . . . And now . . . if perhaps there is anything you want me to tell you, ask it in so many words, and I shall answer."

"Dear heart," he said in a voice that broke, while his strong arms closed about her. "You have told it already, thank God!"

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